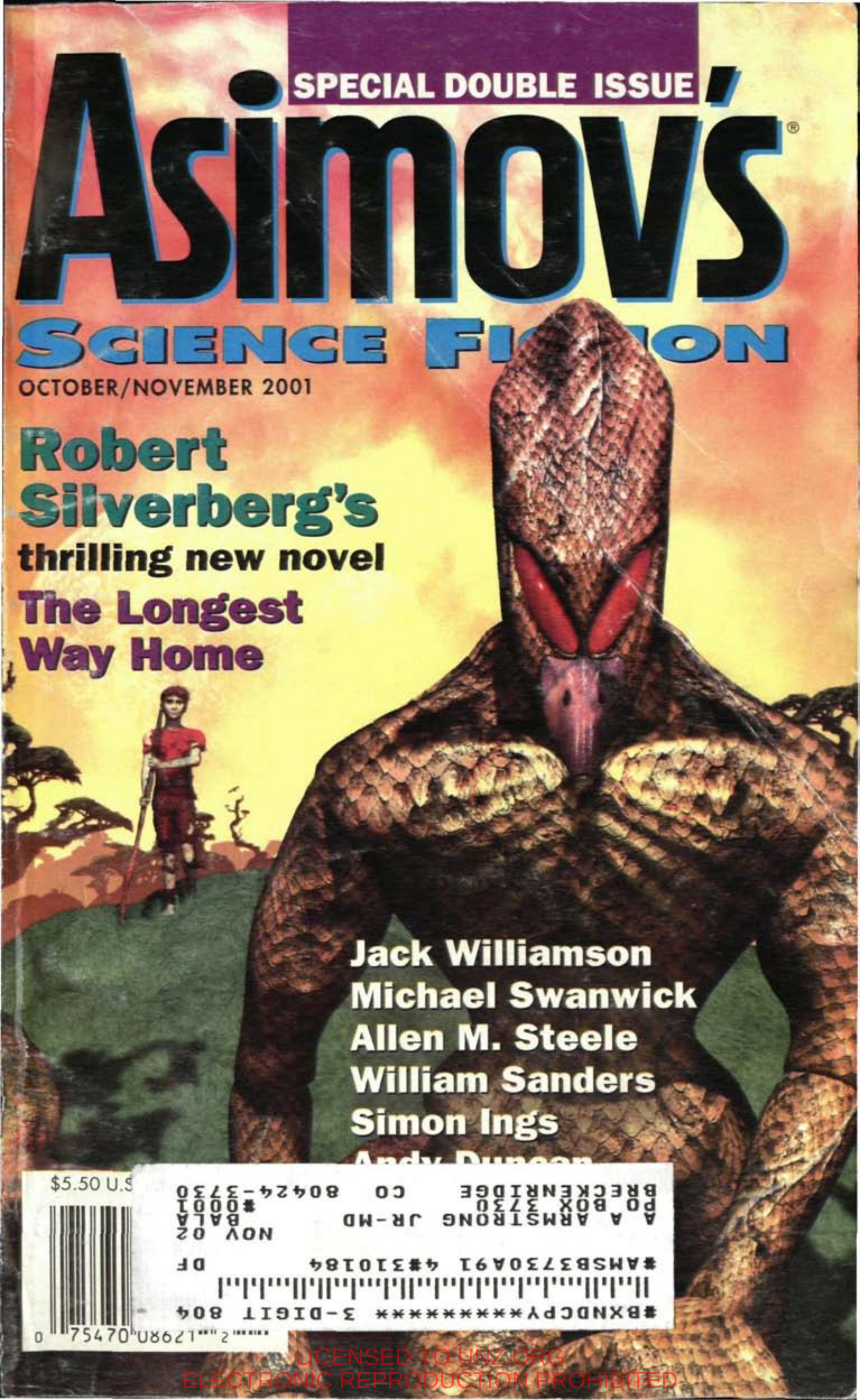

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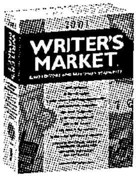
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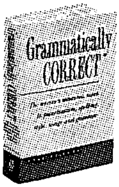
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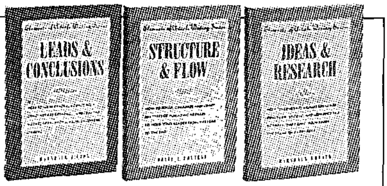
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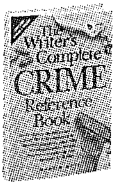
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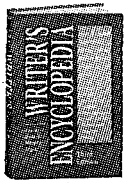
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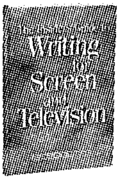
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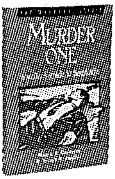

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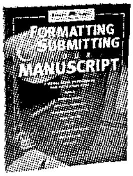
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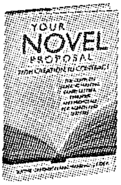
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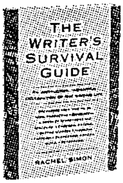
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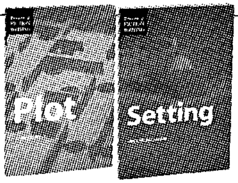
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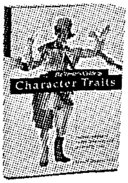
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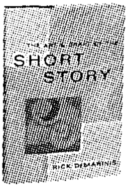
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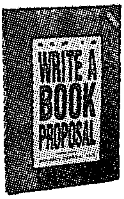
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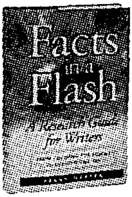
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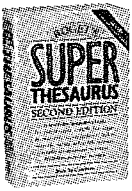
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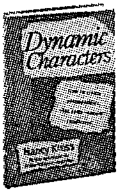
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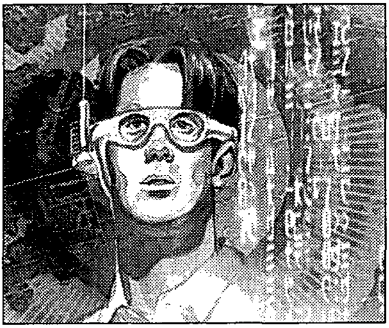

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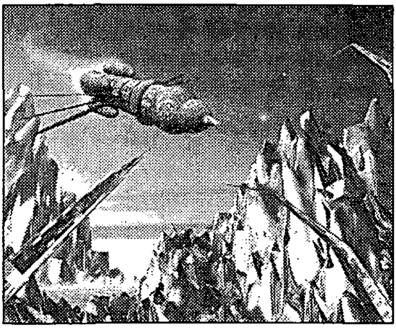

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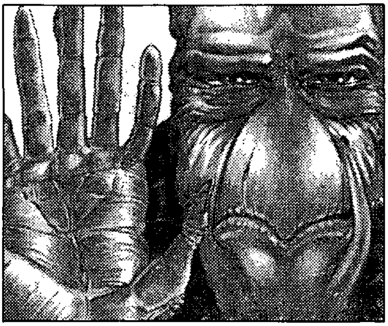

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

DEAD SOULS

One of the first great nineteenth-century Russian novels is the strange, almost surrealistic *Dead Souls* of Nikolai Gogol, a book that in some ways prefigures the robust, exuberant absurdities of such twentieth-century classics as *Catch-22* and *The Adventures of Augie March*. Gogol's sly hero—anti-hero, really—is one Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, a shrewd operator who goes around Russia offering to buy "dead souls," that is, the identities of serfs who have died since the last census.

In Czarist Russia a century and a half ago, landowners were required to pay taxes on serfs who were linked to their estates until the next census date, even if they had died in the meantime. So far as the census register was concerned, in other words, the dead serfs were deemed still to be alive (and taxable) until officially tallied as deceased.

The first landowner Chichikov approaches is, of course, suspicious of his motives. Why would anyone want to pay for the ownership of dead serfs? But Chichikov assures him that the transaction is perfectly legal—that the Treasury would indeed profit by it—and the landowner, unwilling to take good money for something so worthless, grandly agrees to transfer the serfs to Chichikov without payment. Others, though, are quite eager to do business with him, and elaborately praise the qualities of their dead serfs in order to get Chichikov to raise his offer. ("Why are you being so stingy?" one landowner asks. "It's cheap at the price. There is Miheyev, the wheelwright, the carriages he made were always on springs. And Probka Stepan, the carpenter? I stake my head on it that you wouldn't find another peasant like him. The strength of him! He was over seven feet high! And Yeremei Sorokoplekhin! Why, he's worth the whole bunch of them.... That's the kind of folk they are! It's not the quality you'd get from some Plyushkin or other.")

Precisely why Chichikov wants to acquire these souls is something that emerges gradually in the course of Gogol's long and brilliant novel, which he left unfinished at his death in 1852 but which even in its incomplete form is one of the masterpieces of Russian literature. What has called it to my mind today is a remarkable story out of India that is a kind of *Dead Souls* in reverse, a surrealistic black comedy which, like most black comedies, contains within it the stuff of tragedy.

My source for this story is a piece from the New York *Times* by Barry Bearak, whose admirable first paragraph would surely have brought applause from Gogol himself:

"Lal Bihari, founder of the Association of Dead People, first learned he was deceased when he applied for a bank loan in 1975."

The Association of Dead People! How could I resist a hook like that? So I read on, and learned that Lal Bihari is a citizen of the state of Uttar Pradesh in northwestern India, near the border with Nepal. When the bank turned him down for the loan because he was listed in state records as having died, he headed off to Azamgarh, the district capital, to consult the official in charge of those records—a man who happened to be a friend of his. "Take a look for yourself," the official told him. "It is all written here in the registry. You are certified as legally dead."

Finding out what had happened involved returning to Khalilabad, his ancestral village, where Bihari had not lived since boyhood. There he discovered that an uncle of his had bribed the local officials to put him down in the books as dead—thus allowing the uncle to inherit Bihari's share of the family's jointly held farmland. Bribery of officials is apparently not an uncommon phenomenon in India—it seems to be the only way to get anything done, from the highest levels of government down to the local courthouse level. It turned out that the slippery uncle had paid the equivalent of twenty-five dollars to have Mr. Bihari declared dead, quite a considerable sum in modern India. (As the *Times* story noted, the uncle could have hired a hit man for half as much.)

Lal Bihari did not take his defunct state lightly. When his first attempts to be restored to life went nowhere in the Uttar Pradesh bureaucracy, he founded his Association of Dead People, had stationery printed, and with a nice sense of tongue-in-cheek absurdism added the Hindi word "mritak," which means "dead," to the name on his business cards. Then he set about trying to get his existence officially recognized by doing such things as running for office, suing people, and attempting to get arrested.

None of it worked. No one in the state government was willing to recognize the fact that Lal Bihari was very much alive. Evidently when an Indian bureaucrat is bought, he *stays* bought. Bihari was told that

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the state records plainly showed that he was dead, and a dead man could not run for office, and has no legal standing in a lawsuit.

He would not give up. "In pursuing my battle, I had developed quite an identity," he told the *Times* reporter. "I became the leader of a movement. I knew I had other dead people to save."

During the course of his strange crusade Bihari even came up with the wonderfully ingenious idea of having his wife apply for widow's benefits, but—and here we have a touch reminiscent more of Kafka than of Gogol—the same officials who insisted he was dead found some pretext for refusing to approve any payout to his "widow." Undeterred, Bihari bombarded the government with letters and pamphlets, staged a mock funeral for himself in the state capitol, and otherwise made such a nuisance of himself that in 1994—nineteen years after his discovery of his own demise—Lal Bihari was officially resurrected by the state of Uttar Pradesh and was able to return in triumph to his old village of Khalilabad.

No bitter confrontation with his scheming uncle took place, though, because by this time the uncle was dead himself, actually and literally. Nor did Bihari even try to reclaim his bit of land from the cousins who now were farming it. "We have done him a great injustice," one of the cousins conceded, and that was good enough for Lal Bihari. He feels that the satisfaction of making them feel guilty is sufficient—and the land isn't worth very much, besides.

But the forty-five-year-old merchant continues his work on behalf of the living dead. Like an upside-down Chichikov he travels through the countryside, looking for others like himself, people who have been victims of the same sort of chicanery, dead souls.

Among those who have been turned up by the Association of Dead People is one Bhagwan Prashad Mishra, an eighty-year-old villager of Mubarakpur, who has spent the last twenty-one years in the limbo of official defunctitude after having been done out of a parcel of land by a pack of tricky nephews. There is a particularly nice twist in this case, because in fact Bhagwan Prashad Mishra still is registered as the legal owner of four other parcels of land; he is dead only so far as the one parcel "inherited" by his nephews is concerned.

Then there is the forty-eight-year-old farmer Ansar Ahmed of the ninety-family village of Madhnapar, who in 1982 was declared to be dead after some fast footwork on the part of his brother, Nabi Sarwar Khan. Having lost the family rice paddy to Nabi Sarwar Khan, Ansar Ahmed was reduced to complete poverty and had to take up residence with his widowed mother. The village was divided on the issue of Anser Ahmed's death, some supporting his claim to existence and others, says the *Times* article, "treating him as an invisible specter." (And here I am reminded of an old story of mine, "To See the Invisible Man," in which my protagonist, having been convicted of an antisocial crime, is condemned to a year of invisibility: no one is allowed to notice his presence, no matter what sort of outrageous things he may happen to be doing for the sake of getting attention.)

Last July, the High Court of Uttar Pradesh, having learned at last through the activities of the Association of Dead People that there might be hundreds of such cases in the state, ordered an investigation. "As the bureaucrats once feared the devil, they now fear the Association of the Dead," says Lal Bihari.

Under the prodding of the High Court the state government was re-

Lanterns Over Demner:
A Science Fiction Murder Mystery
by Dale A. Kagan
The Special Forces Council, Earth, taught Governor Eccles how to develop a telepathic block. Now their telepaths cannot find out what he is trying to hide. Four of the elite Council, an adjunct of the military, are summoned to the estate of Governor Eccles on the Planet Dauropa. Eleven people are present in the castle-like mansion, in the Demner mountains. One of them is a murderer.

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"Dale Kagan's debut novel will delight younger and older readers...it uses humor and suspense." –reviewer on Amazon.com.
See Chapter 1 on www.xlibris.com/lanternsoverdemner.html.

quired to publish advertisements calling upon undead citizens to step forward and claim their rights, and allowing those who were able to demonstrate their existence to regain their places in the roster of the living. One of those thus resurrected was Ansar Ahmed, who has now brought criminal charges against his brother. But the brother is not admitting any guilt whatever. "These are only allegations," he says grumpily.

So the task goes on. And though Mr. Bihari and his Association of Dead People remind me, in this way and that, of certain aspects of the works of Nikolai Gogol and Franz Kafka and Joseph Heller and Saul Bellow and even Robert Silverberg and Philip K. Dick, we need to remember that what happened to Ansar Ahmed and Bhagwan Prashad Mishra and Lal Bihari was only too painfully real, over there in the bizarre alien universe that is the subcontinent of India. They are not figures out of literature: they are real, suffering people, who had to fight terrible struggles against a corrupt bureaucracy. There's nothing funny about being stricken from the register of living beings because someone has paid a twenty-five-dollar bribe to turn you into an unperson.

Still—the writer in me wonders what the Association of Dead People will do once it has brought all the unjustly dead of Uttar Pradesh back to life. And the mischievous thought arises in me, by way of Gogol's Chichikov, that there must be plenty of profit to be found by locating people who are *really* dead and somehow getting them restored to the roster of the living over there. Let's hope the idea doesn't occur to Lal Bihari. ❍

Letters to the Editor

Michael Swanwick

Although readers are free to believe whatever they'd like about this author, a staid and dignified bio can be found on page 167.

Dear Contributor,

We are pleased to be publishing your work in Asimov's. To do so, however, we will need updated information for the author's blurb that will accompany it. Please send whatever biographical and bibliographical information that we can use along with the signed contracts in the enclosed envelope as soon as possible. Thank you.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Sheila Williams
Executive Editor

December 19, 1988

Ms. Sheila Williams
Asimov's Science Fiction
475 Park Avenue South
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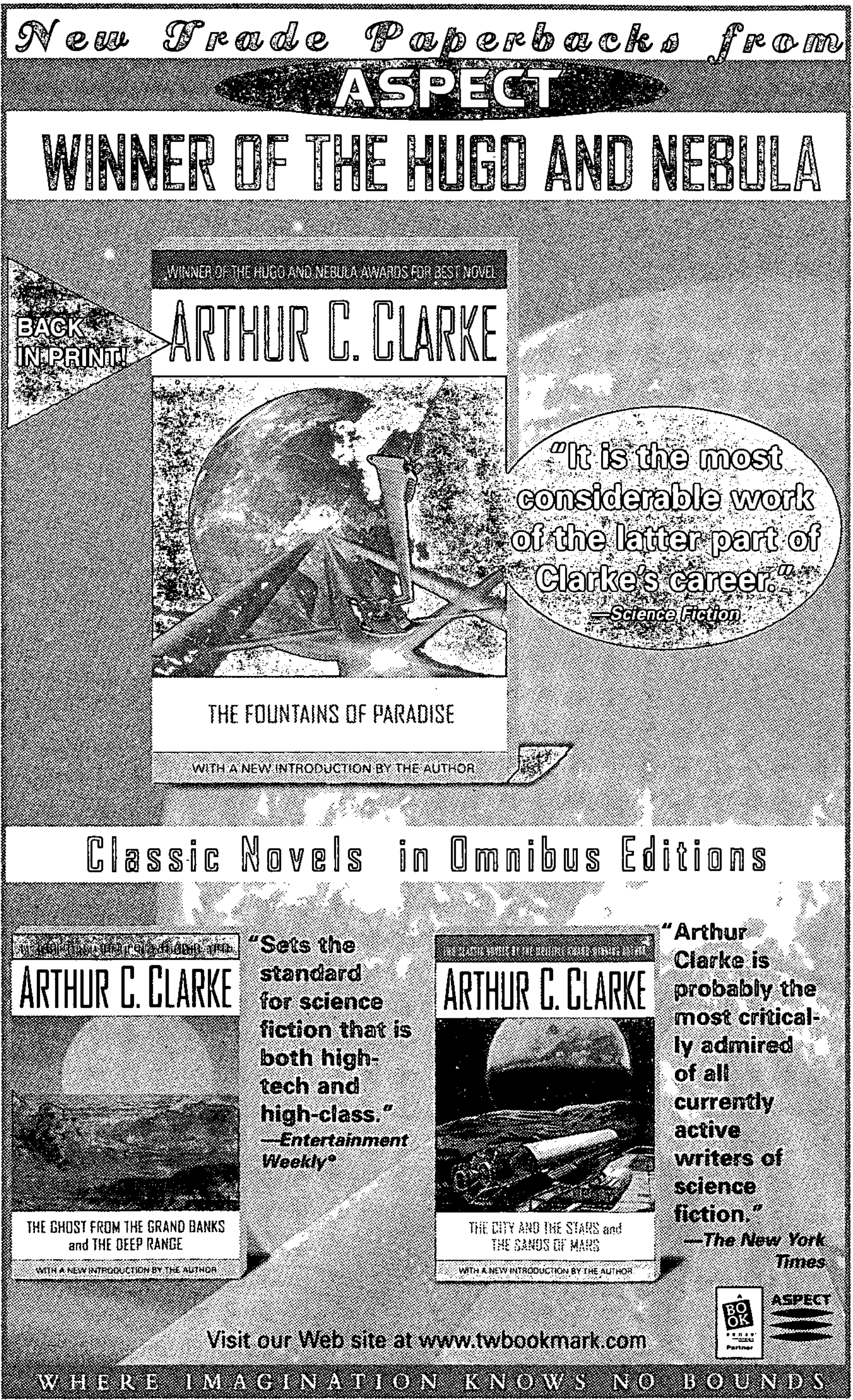
Dear Sheila:

I am pleased that you are publishing "The Dragon Line" in Asimov's. My updated bio follows:

Along with H.G. Wells, Michael Swanwick is generally thought of as one of the two founding fathers of science fiction. Where Wells brought a high literary sensibility and seriousness of purpose to the field, however, Swanwick is better known for his wild extrapolative ingenuity and slap-



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dash plots. Many inventions we now take for granted—the land submarine, the steam tricycle, and the nasal decongestant, to name but a few—appeared first within the pages of his "nouvelles romances electrique."

Swanwick's works have been acclaimed by many of our finest drinkers. They include Around the World in a Bassoon, Voyage to the Bottom of the Ground, The Electric Chaise (part of the "Unspeakable Voyages" series), Dirigible Mania! and The Interurban Dreadnaught. He has also written a penetrating series of monographs exploring the fiction of Lionel Fanthorpe. In his spare time he likes to dress up as a bat and pummel wrongdoers.

There you go. Have a very merry Christmas, okay? Love to all.

Best,

Michael

February 5, 1992

Dear Sheila,

As requested, here is my updated bio:

Larger than a breadbox and wittier than all of Wilmington, Delaware, put together, Michael Swanwick is most widely famed and esteemed for the same baffling line of gaudy persiflage that once briefly resulted in his being incorrectly listed in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as the twenty-second President of the United States, less (but still significantly) widely famed and esteemed for a scrupulously painstaking research style in consequence of which warrants are still outstanding in the several states featured in his justly acclaimed novelette, "The Plagues of August," and without question least widely famed and esteemed for a purported and all-but-obsessive tendency to fall into the sort of run-on sentence that might, though so far it has not, be compared to a single snowflake carved with astonishing but pointless skill into an endlessly recursive filigree. He denies everything.

That's all. Take good care, hear? I'll be writing you soon.

All best,

Michael

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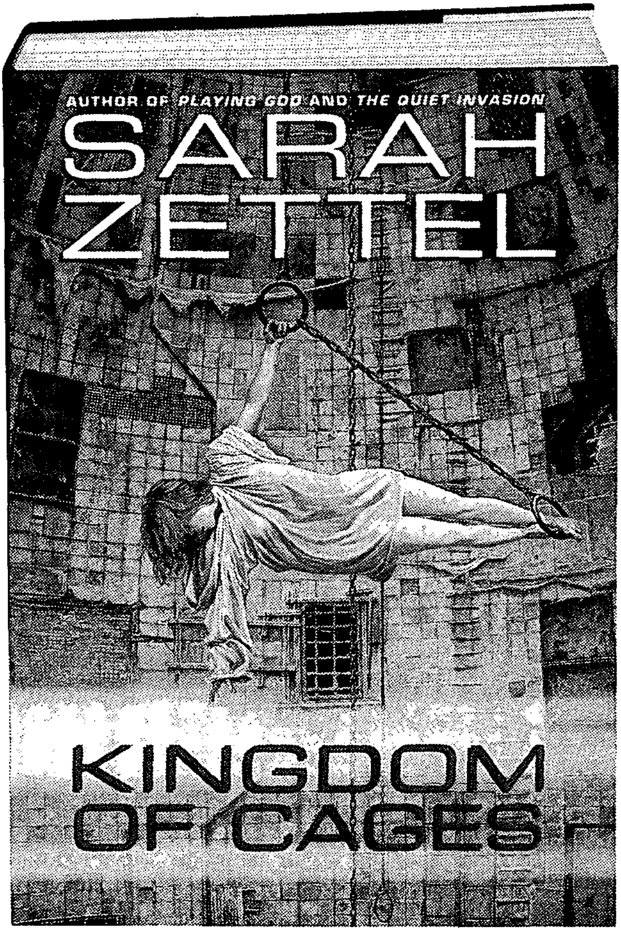
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October 21, 1992

Dear Sheila,

As per your recent request, here is my updated bio:

Germany's most beloved cartoon mouse, Michael Swanwick, was created by Jewish slave animators in the notorious Peenemunde Kartoonwerks in 1934. Fleeing the consequences of history, he surfaced in postwar Argentina, where a combination of plastic surgery and intensive genetic reprogramming allowed him to move to California and cut a complex series of deals with right-wing arms manufacturers. The original acetates were all bought up and overdubbed in English and a false history back-created that quickly convinced over 98 percent of the American public he was an indigenous product. He has since branched out into amusement parks, live cinema, and the establishment and dictation of moral standards. He is currently at work on a national program of neighborhood ethical hygiene squads.

No, no, don't say that! . . . Contracts enclosed. Take good care, yes?

All best,

Michael

July 28, 1993

Dear Sheila,

Here, as requested-by-Xeroxed-form-letter, is updated bio material (I even saved you the trouble of writing it up in intro form) for "The Mask":

Ascended master Michael Swanwick, having transcended the gross material sphere, now exists in a bodiless state of spiritual perfection and perpetual bliss. He is currently a being of pure awareness who sheds the Buddha-light on the grateful denizens of literally thousands of worlds. However, he still expects to be paid promptly. You wouldn't want to stiff an ascended master. He's got the power to make you sorry you ever thought of it. You want to wake up one morning and find yourself in the body of a migrant laborer in the heart of Pennsylvania's mushroom country? Or maybe an arthritic goat? He could do it. Don't kid yourself. These Bodhisattvas-manqué are mean mothers. That's why we wrote the check for this story and sent it out STAT!

Not that I would do that to *you,* Sheila. . . !

All best,

Michael

January 13, 1998

Dear Editor:

Your corrected galleys/proofs for my *Asimov's* story/poem are enclosed. While I regret having to use a Xeroxed form letter—I don't like them myself!— the press of constant publication has forced me to this pass. However, in my experience galleys/proofs for stories/poems inevitably include one or more of the following items.

Stegosaurus has been changed to Triceratops on the rationale that they would actually use chronologically local blood. Triceratops being the common as well as the proper name, it does not need to be italicized.

Since *Carnosauria* is now a disputed clade, I've revised all reference to carnosaurs. A pity, though. Carnosaur is a lovely word.

According to *The Complete Dinosaur* (Farlow & Brett-Surman, eds., Indiana University Press), which despite the title is the closest thing there is to an authoritative text, dromaeosaur is the proper spelling, and I have so restored it.

Finally, allow me to thank you for buying a *Michael Swanwick*™ story. We here in the Production Department think of our purchasers not as gullible marks, but rather as members of our family of fine prose products. Remember, tripe is available at a slightly reduced rate.

All best,

Michael Swanwick

Senior Executive Writer

February 12, 1998

Dear Sheila,

I know you don't like these form letters, but WHOSE FAULT IS IT? Every month you buy another god-damned story and then expect me to have new biographical data for you. There is no new biographical data—nothing new ever happens to me because I HAVE NO LIFE ANY MORE! I just sit at my desk and write you stories! That's all! There ain't no more! You've taken it all! Rant! Snort! Shriek!

(Pant! Pant! Pant!)

All right. Okay. I'm back in control again. Here's the data you requested:

Though Michael Swanwick usually has Kellogg's Almond Crunch cereal for breakfast, he recently stopped at the Dunkin Donuts for two Boston Cremes. Since he last appeared in Asimov's he's been to the post office almost every day and often found mail waiting for him there. Sometimes he stares out the window of his office at the parking lot adjacent his house. He is currently working on a story for our next issue.

And that pretty much says it all. Well, and hoping you are the same. . . .

All best,

Michael

March 5, 1998

Dear Sheila:

Once again, it's that time of month (well, it's every twenty-one days, technically, but "tritenight" doesn't have the same ring to it) when I have to let you know how my biography has changed since last you bought a story from me.

And what a fabulous twenty-one days it has been! Since last we communicated, I have achieved full spiritual masterhood and been recognized by the Dalai Lama and the ascended masters as the one true Western Bodhisattva. My selfless labors on your behalf, writing fabulous short fiction for money that wouldn't keep a dog alive, were a significant factor in my elevation. There was even talk of my transcending the material plane entirely and going straight to Nirvana. Indeed, I was tempted. But well I knew that your need was greater than mine.

Such is my humility. So great is my love for science fiction.

That's all. Be sure to mention that *Jack Faust* was published last year to ringing acclaim, and that as of when the magazine went to press it was up for the BSFA Award. Also that I'm writing a new novel and that it's the very best kind of novel, one that breaks your heart in the first chapter and heals it in the last, and in between fills your mind with joyous wonder.

Nam Myoho Renge Kyo,

Michael

March 20, 1998

Dear Sheila:

Sweet Jesus, have three weeks passed so quickly? Time for a new identity again. Let's see. (Mutter, mutter.) Okay, howzabout this:

Born on a mountaintop in Tennessee,
Kilt him a b'ar when he was only three . . .

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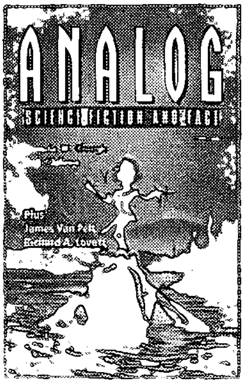
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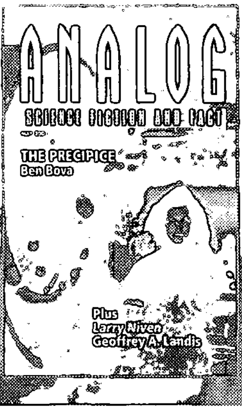
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No, I did that in January. Lemme think. Okay, here we go:

Michael Swanwick is one of the most brilliant and varied writers we know and so popular that we've completely lost track of exactly how many awards he's currently up for! Lately, he's been prolific as well, turning out a dazzling array of fiction, ranging from hard science to weird fantasy, from the bizarre (who else but Michael would set a story on a planet-sized grasshopper?) to the darkly tragic. Here, in yet another change of pace, he presents us with a collection of nine effortless—effortless for him, that is!—short-shorts, that are by turn humorous, horrific, and deeply moving. We can hardly wait to see what he comes up with next!!!

There. That'll hold the little bastards for another month. Hey, is this mike still on?

Yours for better children's TV,

Michael

July 7, 1998

Dear Sheila:

Well, I imagine you've already heard the splendid news about my creating my own religion! Yes, *Pseudoscientology*™ is the ladder that will take me out of the dank marsh of genre and into the glorious spiritual light of multinational tax-free incorporation. No doubt you'll want to include the Church's mailing address and donation coupon in your blurb.

But that's not all I'm up to! I've spent elements of the summer digging for fossils in China (my worldview-revising caudipteryxes and sinosauropteryxes are currently on view in National Geographic's Explorer's Hall in Washington, D.C.), relocating my legal address so I can run for the Senate in the next election (look out, Trent Lott!), and setting simultaneous world records in weight lifting and figure skating—the first human ever to excel in both sports. Not bad for a retired president of the National Reserve Bank.

Beside these accomplishments, my Hugo nomination for *Jack Faust,* my Nebula and World Fantasy Awards, my twenty-plus nominations overall for various major awards (so many, I've lost count!), the incredible productivity I've enjoyed this past year turning out story after story, and even the exciting new novel I'm working on right now—all these shrink to nothing. Your disk is enclosed.

All best,

Michael

June 29, 1999

Dear Sheila:

Biographical information. I have no new biographical information. I don't actually *do* anything, just sit here in the unheated cardboard box that serves me as an office and write story after story to feed into the monstrous maw of the literary-industrial complex whose lackey you are, typing as the blood runs down the tattered stumps of what once were my fingers, deep into the night, feeding my family nothing but crusts of stale bread. . . . No, wait. That's Fyodor Dostoevski. I keep getting the two of us confused.

I'll try again. I've just sold a new novel about dinosaurs, time travel, and the ultimate fate of humanity, to Avon Books. I've been writing like a banshee, so many stories I lost track of their number. And I'm going to be GOH at the national Swedish SF convention in October.

Other than that, pretty much nothing.

All best,

Michael

September 30, 2000

Dear Sheila:

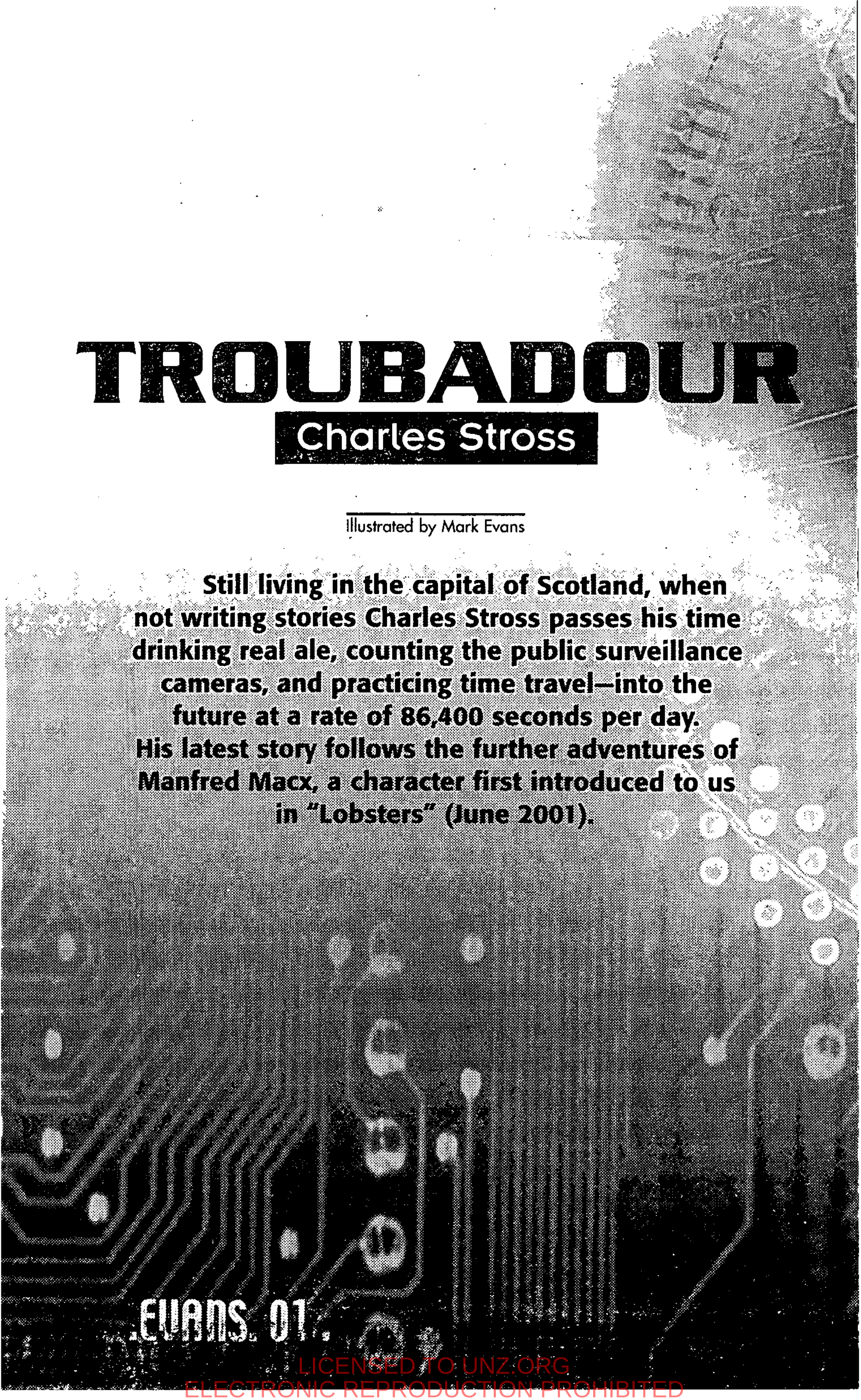
Stop. Stop. For the love of God. . . . You've inflicted that dread Xerox on me so many times now, I've completely forgotten who I am. Did you ever see the movie *Zelig*, about the man with so slight an identity that he becomes a human chameleon, changing into whatever those nearest desire him to be? That's what you've done to me.

In the last week I've been a guest DJ for Snoop Doggy Dogg, a radical lesbian terrorist in the Hothead Paisan Brigade, a tax accountant for H&R Block, and an advisor on manuscript preservation for the Vatican Library. You've ruined my life!

On the positive side, you can expect new stories any day now from James Patrick Kelly, Connie Willis, Walter Jon Williams, L. Timmel Duchamp, Mary Rosenblum, John Kessel, Ursula K. LeGuin. . . .

Yours disjointedly,

The Collective
Writers of
Asimov's ○

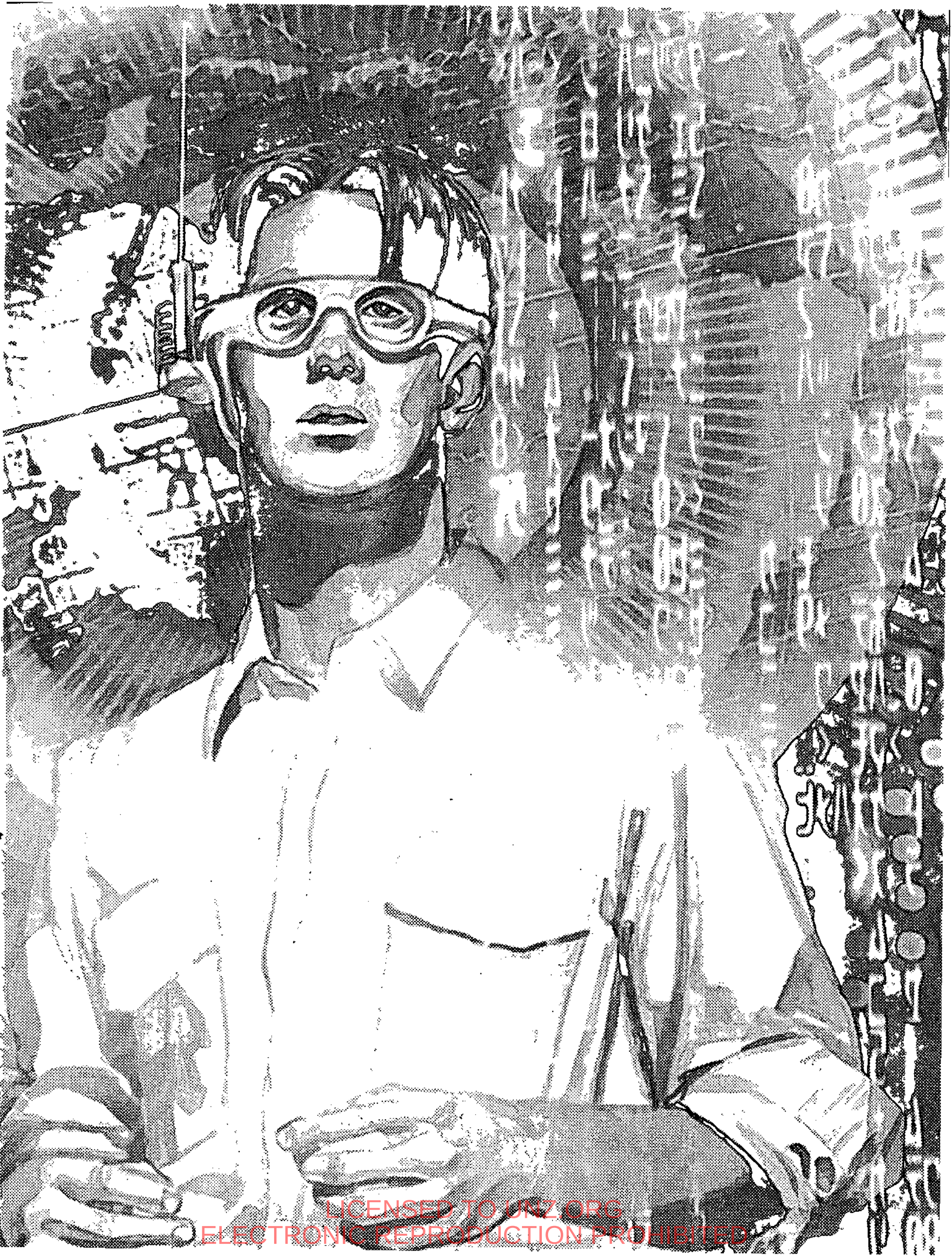


TROUBADOUR

Charles Stross

Illustrated by Mark Evans

Still living in the capital of Scotland, when not writing stories Charles Stross passes his time drinking real ale, counting the public surveillance cameras, and practicing time travel—into the future at a rate of 86,400 seconds per day. His latest story follows the further adventures of Manfred Macx, a character first introduced to us in "Lobsters" (June 2001).



Manfred Macx is on the run. His grey-eyed fate is in hot pursuit, blundering after him through divorce court, chat room, and meetings of the International Monetary Emergency Fund: it's a merry dance he leads her. But Manfred isn't running away: he's discovered a mission. He's going to make a stand against the laws of economics in the ancient city of Rome. He's going to mount a concert for the spiritual machines: he's going to set the companies free, and break the Italian government.

In his shadow, his monster runs, keeping him company, never halting.

Manfred enters Europe through an airport that's all twentieth-century chrome and ductwork, barbaric in its decaying nuclear-age splendor. He breezes through customs and walks down a long, echoing arrival hall, sampling the local media feeds. It's November, and, in a misplaced corporate search for seasonal cheer, the proprietors have come up with a final solution to the Christmas problem: a mass execution of plush Santas and elves. Bodies hang limply overhead every few meters, feet occasionally twitching in animatronic death, like a war crime perpetrated in a toy shop. Corporations don't understand mortality, Manfred thinks, as he passes a mother herding along her upset children. Their immortality is a drawback when dealing with the humans they graze on: they lack insight into one of the main factors that motivates the meat machines. He'll have to do something about that.

The free media channels here are as dense and richly self-referential as anything he's seen in America. The accent's different, though. Luton, London's fourth satellite airport, speaks with an annoyingly bumptious twang, like an Australian with a plum in its mouth. *Hello, stranger! Is that a brain in your pocket or are you just pleased to think me? Ping Watford Informatics for the latest in bluetooth modules and cheesy motion picture references.* He turns the corner and finds himself squeezed up against the wall between the baggage reclaim office and a crowd of drunken Belgian tractor-drag fans, while his left goggle is trying to urgently tell him something about the railway infrastructure of Columbia. The fans wear blue face paint and chant something that sounds ominously like the ancient British war-cry, *Wemberrrly, Wemberrrly,* and they're dragging a gigantic virtual tractor-totem through the webspace analogue of the arrivals hall. He takes the reclaim office instead.

As he enters the baggage reclaim zone, his jacket stiffens and his glasses dim: he can hear the lost souls of suitcases crying for their owners. The eerie keening sets his own accessories on edge with a sense of loss, and for a moment he's so spooked that he nearly shuts down the thalamic-limbic shunt interface that lets him feel their emotions. He's not in favor of emotions right now, with the messy divorce proceedings and the blood sacrifice Pam is trying to extract from him; he'd much rather emotions had never been invented. But he needs the maximum possible sensory bandwidth to keep in touch with the world, so now he feels it in his guts every time his footwear takes a shine to some Moldovan pyramid scheme. *Shut up,* he glyphs at his unruly herd of agents: *can't even hear myself think!*

"Hello sir, have a nice day, how may I be of service?" the yellow plastic his suitcase is on its way to Mombasa, where it will probably be pithed and resurrected in the service of some African cyber-Fagin. That's okay by Manfred—it only contains a statistically normal mixture of second-hand clothes and toiletries, and he only carries it to convince the airline passenger profiling expert systems that he isn't some sort of deviant or terrorist—but it leaves him with a gap in his inventory that he must fill before he leaves the EC zone. He needs to pick up a replacement suitcase so that he has as much luggage leaving the superpower as he had when he entered it: he doesn't want to be accused of trafficking in physical goods. At least, that's his cover story—and he's sticking to it.

There's a row of unclaimed bags in front of the counter, up for sale in the absence of their owner. Some of them are very battered, but among these is a rather good quality suitcase with integral induction-charged rollers and a keen sense of loyalty: exactly the same model as his old one. He polls it and sees not just Glonass, but a GPS tracker, a gazetteer the size of an old-time storage area network, and an iron determination to follow its owner as far as the gates of hell if necessary. Plus the right distinctive scratch on the lower left side of the case. "How much for just this one?" he asks the bellwether on the desk.

"Ninety euros," it says placidly.

Manfred sighs. "You can do better than that." In the time it takes them to settle on seventy-five, the Hang Sen index is down fourteen point one six points and NASDAQ climbs another two point one. "Deal." Manfred spits some virtual cash at the brutal face of the cash register and it unfetters the suitcase, unaware that Macx has paid a good bit more than seventy-five euros for the privilege of collecting this piece of baggage. Manfred bends down and faces the camera in its handle. "Manfred Macx," he says quietly. "Follow me." He feels the handle heat up as it imprints on his fingerprints, digital and phenotypic. Then he turns and walks out of the slave market, his new luggage rolling at his heels.

A short train journey later, Manfred checks into a hotel in Milton Keynes. He watches the sun set from his bedroom window, an occlusion of concrete cows blocking the horizon. The room is functional in an overly naturalistic kind of way, rattan and force-grown hardwood and hemp rugs concealing the support systems and concrete walls behind. He sits in a chair, gin and tonic at hand, absorbing the latest market news and grazing his multichannel feeds in parallel. His reputation is up 2 percent for no obvious reason today, he notices; odd, that. When he pokes at it he discovers that *everybody's* reputation—everybody, that is, who has a publicly traded reputation—is up a bit. It's as if the distributed internet reputation servers are feeling bullish about integrity. There's a global honesty bubble brewing.

Manfred frowns, then snaps his fingers. The suitcase rolls toward him. "Who do you belong to?" he asks.

"Manfred Macx," it replies, slightly bashfully.

"No, before me."

"I don't understand that question."

He sighs. "Open up."

Latches whir and retract: the hard-shell lid rises toward him and he looks inside to confirm the contents.

The suitcase is full of noise.

* * *

It's night in Milton Keynes, sunrise in Hong Kong. Moore's law rolls inexorably on, dragging humanity toward the uncertain future. The planets of the solar system have a combined mass of approximately 2 x 10^{27} kilograms. Around the world, laboring women produce forty-five thousand babies a day, representing 10^{23} MIPS of processing power. Also around the world, fab lines casually churn out thirty million microprocessors a day, representing 10^{23} MIPS. In another ten months, most of the MIPS being added to the solar system will be machine-hosted for the first time. About ten years after that, the solar system's installed processing power will nudge the critical 1 MIP per gram threshold. Beyond that, singularity: a vanishing point beyond which extrapolating progress becomes meaningless. The time remaining before the intelligence spike is now down to double-digit months. . . .

Aineko curls on the pillow beside Manfred's head, purring softly as his owner dreams uneasily. The night outside is dark: vehicles operate on autopilot, running lights dipped to let the Milky Way shine down upon the sleeping city. Their quiet, fuel-cell powered engines do not trouble Manfred's sleep. The robot cat keeps sleepless watch, alert for intruders: but there are none, save the whispering ghosts of Manfred's metacortex, feeding his dreams with their state vectors.

The metacortex—a distributed cloud of software agents that surrounds him in netspace—is as much a part of Manfred as the society of mind that occupies his skull; his thoughts migrate into it, spawning new agents to research new experiences, and at night they return to roost and share their knowledge.

Welcome to the early twenty-first century, human.

Manfred is dreaming of an alchemical marriage. She waits for him at the altar in a strapless black gown, the surgical instruments gleaming in her gloved hands. "This won't hurt a bit," she explains as she adjusts the straps. "I only want your genome; the extended phenotype can wait until . . . later." Blood-red lips, licked: a kiss of steel, then she presents the income-tax bill. "You're quite extraordinary, you know: with a thousand more like you, we could abolish the budget deficit, bring back the cold war, let the good times roll again."

There's nothing accidental about this dream. As he experiences it, microelectrodes in his hypothalamus trigger sensitive neurons. Revulsion and shame flood him at the sight of her face, the sense of his vulnerability. Manfred's metacortex, in order to facilitate his divorce, is trying to decondition his strange love. It has been working on him for weeks, now—but still he craves her whiplash touch, the humiliation of his wife's control, the sense of helpless rage at her unpayable taxes, demanded with interest.

Aineko watches him from the pillow, purring continuously. Retractable claws knead the bedding, first one paw then the next. Aineko is full of the ancient feline wisdom she uploaded into him when mistress and master were exchanging data and bodily fluids. Aineko is more cat than robot these days. Aineko knows that Manfred is experiencing nameless neurasthenic agonies, but really doesn't give a shit about that as long as the power supply is clean and there are no intruders.

Aineko curls up and joins Manfred in sleep, dreaming of laser-guided mice.

Manfred is jolted awake by the hotel room phone shrilling for attention.

"Hello?" he asks, fuzzily.

"Manfred Macx?" It's a human voice, with a gravelly east-coast accent.

"Yeah?" Manfred struggles to sit up. His mouth feels like the inside of a tomb and his eyes don't want to open.

"My name is Alan Glashwiecz, of Smoot, Sedgwick Associates. Am I correct in thinking that you are the Manfred Macx who is a director of a company called, uh, agalmic dot holdings dot root dot one eight four dot ninety-seven dot A-for-able dot B-baker dot five, incorporated?"

"Uh." Manfred blinks and rubs his eyes. "Hold on a moment." When the retinal patterns fade he pulls on his glasses and powers them up. "Just a second now." Browsers and menus ricochet through his sleep-laden eyes. "Can you repeat the company name?"

"Sure." Glashwiecz repeats himself patiently. He sounds as tired as Manfred feels.

"Um." Manfred finds it, floating three tiers down an elaborate object hierarchy. It's flashing for attention. There's a priority interrupt, an incoming lawsuit that hasn't propagated up the inheritance tree yet. He prods at the object with a property browser. "I'm afraid I'm not a director of that company, Mr. Glashwiecz. I appear to be retained by it as a technical contractor with non-executive power, reporting to the president, but frankly this is the first time I've ever heard of this company. However, I can tell you who's in charge if you want."

"Yes?" The attorney sounds almost interested. Manfred figures it out; the guy's in New Jersey, it must be about three in the morning over there.

Malice—revenge for waking him up—sharpens Manfred's voice. "The president of agalmic.holdings.root.184.97.AB5 is agalmic.holdings.root.184.97.201. The secretary is agalmic.holdings.root.184.D5, and the chair is agalmic.holdings.root.184.E8.FF. All the shares are owned by those companies in equal measure, and I can tell you that their regulations are written in Python. Have a nice day, now!" He thumps the bedside phone control and sits up, yawning, then pushes the do-not-disturb button before it can interrupt again. After a moment, he stands up and stretches, then heads to the bathroom to brush his teeth, comb his hair, and figure out where the lawsuit originated and how a human being managed to get tangled up in his web of robot companies.

While he's having breakfast in the hotel restaurant, Manfred decides that he's going to do something unusual for a change: he's going to make himself temporarily rich. This is a change because Manfred's normal profession is making other people rich. Manfred is an agalmic entrepreneur, a specialist in giving good ideas away for free to people who can do things with them. Manfred doesn't believe in scarcity or zero-sum games or competition—his world is too fast and information-dense to accommodate primate hierarchy games. However, his current situation calls for him to do something radical: something like making himself a temporary billionaire so he can blow off his divorce settlement in an instant, an octopus escaping a predator by vanishing in a cloud of its own ink.

Pam is chasing him partially for ideological reasons—she wants to harness his powerhouse to the creaking bandwagon of her fedgov employers, an asset to the nation—but also because she feels that she owns him, and the last thing any self-respecting dom can tolerate is rejection by her slave. Pam is a born post-neoconservative, a member of the first generation to grow up after the close of the American century. Driven by the need to fix the decaying federal system before it collapses under a mound of Medicare bills and decaying infrastructure, she's willing to use self-denial, entrapment, predatory mercantilism, dirty tricks, any tool that boosts the bottom line. She doesn't understand Manfred, jetting around the world on free airline passes, making strangers rich, somehow never needing money. She *can* see his listing on the reputation servers, hovering around thirty points above IBM: all the metrics of integrity, effectiveness, and goodwill value him above even that most fundamentalist of open-source computer companies. And she knows he craves her tough love, wants to give himself to her completely. So why is he running away?

The reason he's running away is entirely more ordinary. Their unborn daughter, frozen in liquid nitrogen, is an unimplanted ninety-six-hour-old blastula. Pam's bought into the whole Parents for Traditional Children parasite meme. PTC are germ-line recombination refuseniks: they refuse to have their children screened for fixable errors. If there's one thing that Manfred really *can't* cope with, it's the idea that nature knows best—even though that isn't really the point she's making. One steaming fight too many and he kicked back, off to traveling fast and footloose, spinning off new ideas like a memetic dynamo and living on the largesse of the new paradigm. File for divorce on grounds of irreconcilable ideological differences. No more whiplash-and-leather sex.

Before he hits the TGV for Rome, Manfred takes time to visit a model airplane show: it's a good place to be picked up by a CIA stringer, and besides, DIY spy drones are hot shit this decade. Add microtechnology, cameras, and neural networks to balsa-wood flyers and you've got the next generation of military stealth flyer. The gig is happening in a decaying edge-of-town supermarket that rents out its shop floor for events like this; its emptiness is a sign of the times, ubiquitous broadband and expensive gas. (The robotized warehouse next door is, in contrast, frenetically busy, packing parcels for home delivery. Whether they telecommute or herd in meatspace offices, people still need to eat.)

Today, the food hall is full of people. Eldritch ersatz insects buzz menacingly along the shining empty meat counters without fear of electrocution: big monitors unfurled above the deli display cabinets show a weird, jerky view of a three-dimensional nightmare, painted all the synthetic colors of radar. The feminine hygiene galley has been wheeled back to make room for a gigantic plastic-shrouded tampon five meters long and sixty centimeters in diameter—a microsat launcher and conference display, plonked here by the show's sponsors in a transparent attempt to talent-spot the up-and-coming engineering geeks.

Manfred's glasses zoom in and grab a particularly fetching Fokker triplane that buzzes at face height through the crowd: he pipes the image stream up to one of his web sites in real time. The Fokker pulls up in a tight Immelman turn beneath the dust-shrouded pneumatic cash tubes that line the ceiling, then picks up the trail of an F-104G. Cold War Luftwaffe and Great War Luftwaffe dart across the sky in an intricate game of tag. Manfred's so busy tracking the warbirds that he nearly trips over the fat white tube's launcher-erector.

"Eh, Manfred! More care, s'il vouz plait!"

He wipes the planes and glances round. "Do I know you?" he asks politely.

"Amsterdam, two years ago." The woman in the double-breasted suit raises an eyebrow at him and his social secretary remembers her for him, whispers in his ear.

"Annette, from, Arianespace marketing?" She nods and he focuses on her.

Still dressing in the last-century retro mode that confused him the first time they met, she looks like a Kennedy-era secret service man: cropped bleached crew-cut like an angry albino hedgehog, pale blue contact lenses, black tie, narrow lapels. Her earrings are cameras, endlessly watching. "I remember. That cafe in Amsterdam. What brings you here?"

"Why—" her wave takes in the entirety of the show— "this talent show, of course." An elegant shrug and a wave at the orbit-capable tampon. "We're hiring this year. If we re-enter the launcher market, we must employ only the best. Amateurs, not time-servers, engineers who can match the very best Singapore can offer."

For the first time, Manfred notices the discreet corporate logo on the flanks of the booster. "You out-sourced your launch vehicle fabrication?"

Annette explains with forced casualness: "Hotels were more profitable, this past decade. The high-ups, they cannot be bothered with the rocketry, no? Things that go fast and explode, they are passé, they say. Diversify, they say. Until—" Her expression says it all. Manfred nods; her earrings are recording everything she says, due-dilligence monitoring.

"I'm glad to see Europe re-entering the launcher business," he says seriously. "It's going to be very important when the nanosystems conformational replication business gets going for real. A major strategic asset to any corporate entity in the field; even a restaurant chain."

Her laugh sounds like glass bells chiming. "And yourself, mon cher? What brings you to the Confederacion? You must have a deal in mind."

"Well." It's Manfred's turn to shrug. "I was *hoping* to find a CIA agent, but there don't seem to be any here today."

"*That* is not surprising," Annette says resentfully. "The CIA think the space industry, she is dead. Fools!" She continues for a minute, enumerating the many shortcomings of the Central Intelligence Agency with vigor and a distinctly Parisian rudeness. "They are become almost as bad as AP and Reuters since they go public," she finishes. "All these wire services! And they are, ah, stingy. The CIA does not understand that good news must be paid for at market rates if freelance stringers are to survive. They are to be laughed at. It is *so* easy to plant disinformation on them. . . ." By way of punctuation a remarkably maneuverable miniature ornithopter swoops around her head, does a double-backflip, and dives off in the direction of the liquor display.

An Iranian woman wearing a backless leather minidress and a nearly transparent scarf barges up and demands to know how much the micro-booster costs to buy; she is dissatisfied with Annette's attempt to direct her to the manufacturer's WAP site, and Annette looks distinctly flustered by the time the woman's boyfriend—a dashing young air force pilot—shows up to escort her away. "Tourists," she mutters, before noticing Manfred, who is staring off into space with fingers twitching. "Manfred?"

"Uh—what?"

"I have been on this shop floor for six hours, and my feet, they kill me." She takes hold of his left arm. "If I say to you I can write for the CIA wire service, will you take me to a restaurant and buy me dinner and tell me what it is you want to say?"

Welcome to the second decade of the twenty-first century; the second decade in human history when the intelligence of the environment has shown signs of rising to match human demand.

The news from around the world is distinctly depressing this evening. In

Maine, guerrillas affiliated with Parents for Traditional Children announce they've planted logic bombs in pre-natal clinic gene scanners, making them give random false positives when checking for hereditary disorders: the damage so far is six abortions and fourteen class action lawsuits.

The International Convention on Performing Rights is holding a third round of crisis talks in an attempt to stave off the final collapse of music licensing. On the one hand, hard-liners representing the Copyright Control Association of America are pressing for restrictions on duplicating the altered emotional states associated with specific media performances: as a demonstration that they mean business, two "software engineers" in California have been kneecapped, tarred, feathered, and left for dead under placards accusing them of reverse-engineering movie plot-lines using avatars of dead and out-of-copyright stars.

On the opposite side of the fence, the Association of Free Artists are demanding the right to perform music in public without a recording contract, and are denouncing the CCAA as being a tool of Mafiya apparachiks who have bought it from the moribund music industry in an attempt to go legit. FBI Director Leonid Kuibyshev responds by denying that the Mafiya is a significant presence in the United States.

A marginally intelligent email virus masquerading as an IRS audit has caused havoc throughout America, garnishing an estimated eighty billion dollars in confiscatory tax withholdings into a numbered Swiss bank account. A different email virus is busy hijacking people's bank accounts, sending 10 percent of their assets to the previous victim and then mailing itself to everyone in the current mark's address book: a self-propelled pyramid scheme in action. Oddly, nobody is complaining much. While the mess is being sorted out, business IT departments have gone to standby, awaiting an expected wave of mutant corporation tax demands.

Tipsters are warning of an impending readjustment in the over-inflated reputations market, following revelations that some u-media gurus have been hyped past all realistic levels of credibility, and the consequent damage to the junk bonds market in integrity.

The EC council of independent heads of state have denied plans for another attempt at *eurofederalisme,* at least until the economy rises out of its current slump. Three extinct species have been resurrected in the past month; unfortunately, endangered ones are now dying off at a rate of one a day. And a group of militant anti-frankenfood campaigners are being pursued by Interpol after they announced that they have spliced a metabolic pathway for cyanogenic glycosides into maize seedcorn destined for human-edible crops. No deaths as yet, but having to test breakfast cereal for cyanide is really going to dent consumer trust.

About the only people who're doing well right now are the uploaded lobsters—and the crusties aren't even remotely human.

Manfred and Annette eat on the top deck of the buffet car as their TGV barrels through a tunnel under the English Channel. Annette, it transpires, has been commuting daily from Paris; which was, in any case, Manfred's next destination. From the show, he messaged Aineko to round up his baggage and meet him at Waterloo Station, in a terminal like the shell of a giant steel woodlouse. Annette left her space launcher in the supermarket overnight: an unfueled test article, it is of no security significance.

The railway buffet car is run by a Nepalese fast food franchise. "I sometimes wish for to stay on the train," Annette says as she waits for her mismas bhat. "Past Paris! Think. Settle back in your couchette, to awaken in Moscow and change onto the TGV. All the way to Vladivostok in two days." She reaches round her ears and removes her camera bugs, drops them in her breast pocket.

"If they let you through the border," Manfred mutters. Russia is one of those places that still requires passports and asks if you are now or ever have been an anti-anti-communist: it's still trapped by its bloody-handed history. (Rewind the video stream to Stolypin and start out fresh.) Besides, they have enemies: white Russian oligarchs, protection racketeers in the intellectual property business. Psychotic relics of the failed experiment with Marxism-Objectivism. "Are you *really* a CIA stringer?"

Annette grins, her lips disconcertingly red: "I file dispatches from time to time. Nothing sensitive."

Manfred nods. "My wife has access to their unfiltered stream."

"Your—" Annette pauses. "She, I met? In De Wildemann's?" She sees his expression. "Oh, my poor fool!" She raises her glass to him. "It is not, has not gone, well?"

Manfred sighs and raises a toast toward Annette. "You know your marriage is in a bad way when you send your spouse messages via the CIA, and she communicates using the IRS."

"In only two years." Annette winces. "You will pardon me for saying this—she did not look like your type?"

"I'm not sure what my type is," he says, truthfully. Sometimes he isn't even sure he's human any more; too many threads of his consciousness seem to live outside his head, reporting back whenever they find something interesting. Sometimes he feels like a puppet, and that frightens him because it's one of the early warning signs of schizophrenia. Right now, the external threads of his consciousness are telling him that they like Annette, when she's being herself instead of a cog in the meatspace ensemble of Arianespace management. "I want to be me. What do you want to be?"

She shrugs, as a waiter slides a plate in front of her. "I'm just a, a Parisian babe, no? An ingenue raised in the lilac age of le Confederacion Europée, the self-deconstructed ruins of the gilded European Union."

"Yeah, right." A plate appears in front of Manfred. "And I'm a good old micro-boomer from the MassPike corridor." He peels back a corner of the omelet topping and inspects the food underneath it. "Born in the sunset years of the American century." He pokes at one of the unidentifiable meaty lumps in the fried rice with his fork; it pokes right back. There's a limit to how much his agents can tell him about her—European privacy laws are draconian by American standards—but he knows the essentials. Two parents who are still together, father a petty politician in some town council down in the vicinity of Toulouse. Went to the right *école*. The obligatory year spent bumming around the Confederacion at government expense, learning how other people live—a new kind of empire building, in place of the last century's conscription and jackboot walkabout. No weblog or personal site that his agents can find. She joined Arianespace right out of the polytechnique and has been management track ever since: Korou, Manhattan Island, Paris. "You've never been married, I take it."

She chuckles. "Time is too short! I am still young." She picks up a forkful of food, and adds quietly: "Besides, the government would insist on paying."

"Ah." Manfred tucks into his bowl thoughtfully. With the birthrate declining across Europe, the EC bureaucracy is worried; the old EU started subsidizing babies, a new generation of carers, a decade ago, and it still hasn't dented the problem. All it's done is alienated the brightest women of childbearing age. Soon they'll have to look to the east for a solution, importing a new generation of citizens—unless the long-promised aging hacks prove workable.

"Do you have a hotel?" Annette asks suddenly.

"In Paris?" Manfred is startled: "Not yet."

"You must come home with me, then." She looks at him quizzically.

"I'm not sure I—" He catches her expression. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. My friend Henri, he says I take in strays too easily. But you are not stray. Besides, it is the Friday today. Come with me and I will file your press release for the Company to read. Tell me, do you dance? You look as if you need a wild week-ending, to help forget your troubles!"

Annette drives a steamroller seduction through Manfred's ascetic plans for the weekend. He intended to find a hotel, file a press release, then spend some time researching the corporate funding structure of Parents for Traditional Children and the dimensionality of confidence variation on the reputation exchanges—before heading for Rome. Instead, Annette drags him back to her apartment, a large studio flat tucked away behind an alley in the Marais. She sits him at the breakfast bar while she tidies away his luggage, then makes him close his eyes and swallow two dubious-tasting capsules. Next, she pours them each a tall glass of freezing-cold Aquavit that tastes exactly like Polish rye bread. When they finish it she just about rips his clothes off. Manfred is startled to discover that he has a crowbar-stiff erection; since the last blazing row with Pamela he'd vaguely assumed he was no longer interested in sex. Instead, they end up naked on the sofa, surrounded by discarded clothing—Annette is very conservative, preferring the naked penetrative fuck of the last century to the more sophisticated fetishes of the present day.

Afterward, he's even more surprised to discover that he's still tumescent. "The capsules?" he asks.

She sprawls a well-muscled but thin thigh across him, then reaches down to grab his penis. Squeezes it. "Yes," she admits. "You need much special help, I think." Another squeeze. "Crystal meth and a traditional phosphodiesterase inhibitor." He grabs one of her small breasts, feeling very brutish and primitive. *Naked.* He's not sure Pamela ever let him see her fully naked: she thought skin was more sexy when it was covered. Annette squeezes him again and he stiffens. "More!"

By the time they finish, he's aching, and she shows him how to use the bidet. Everything is crystal clear and her touch is electrifying. While she showers, he sits on the toilet-seat lid and rants about Turing-completeness as an attribute of company law, about cellular automata and the blind knapsack problem, about his work on solving the Communist Central Planning problem using a network of interlocking unmanned companies. About the impending market adjustment in integrity, the sinister resurrection of the recording music industry, and the pressing need to dismantle Mars.

When she steps out of the shower, he tells her that he loves her; she kisses him and slides his glasses and earpieces off his head so that he's *really* naked, sits on his lap, and fucks his brains out again, and whispers in his ear that she loves him and wants to be his manager. Then she leads him into her bedroom and tells him exactly what she wants him to wear, and she puts on her own clothes, and she gives him a mirror with some white powder on it to sniff. When she's got him dolled up, they go out for a night of really serious clubbing, Annette in a tuxedo and Manfred in a blonde wig, red silk off-the-shoulder gown and high heels. Some time in the early hours, exhausted and resting his head on her shoulder during the last tango in a BDSM club in the rue Ste-Anne, he realizes that it really *is* possible to be in lust with someone other than Pamela.

Aineko wakes Manfred by repeatedly head-butting him above the left eye. He groans, and as he tries to open his eyes, he finds that his mouth tastes like a dead trout, his skin feels greasy with makeup, and his head is pounding. There's a banging noise somewhere: Aineko meows urgently. He sits up, feeling unaccustomed silk underwear rubbing against incredibly sore skin—he's fully dressed, just sprawled out on the sofa. Snores emanate from the bedroom; the banging is coming from the front door. Someone wants to come in. *Shit.* He rubs his head, stands up, and nearly falls flat on his face: he hasn't even taken those ridiculous high heels off. *How much did I drink last night?* he wonders. His glasses are on the breakfast bar; he pulls them on and is besieged by an urgent flurry of ideas demanding attention. He straightens his wig, picks up his skirts, and trips across to the door with a sinking feeling. Luckily, his publicly traded reputation is strictly technical.

He unlocks the door. "Who is it?" he asks in English. By way of reply, somebody shoves the door in, hard. Manfred falls back against the wall, winded. His glasses stop working, sidelook displays filling with multi-colored static.

Two men charge in, identically dressed in jeans and leather jackets. They're wearing gloves and occlusive face-masks, and one of them points a small and very menacing ID card at Manfred. A self-propelled gun hovers in the doorway, watching everything. "Where is he?"

"Who?" gasps Manfred, breathless and terrified.

"Macx." The other intruder steps into the living room quickly, pans around, ducks through the bathroom door. Aineko flops as limp as a dishrag in front of the sofa. The intruder checks out the bedroom: there's a brief scream, cut off short.

"I don't know—who?" Manfred is choking with fear.

The other intruder ducks out of the bedroom, waves a hand dismissively.

"We are sorry to have bothered you," the man with the card says stiffly. He replaces it in his jacket pocket. "If you should see Manfred Macx, tell him that the Copyright Control Association of America advises him to cease and desist from his attempt to assist music thieves and other degenerate mongrel second-hander enemies of objectivism. Reputations are only of use to those alive to own them! Goodbye."

The two copyright gangsters disappear through the door, leaving Manfred to shake his head dizzily while his glasses reboot. It takes him a moment to register the scream from the bedroom. "Fuck. *Annette!* . . ."

She appears in the open doorway, holding a sheet around her waist, looking angry and confused. "Annette!" he calls. She looks around, sees him, and begins to laugh shakily. "Annette!" He crosses over to her. "You're okay," he says. "You're okay."

"You too." She hugs him, and she's shaking. Then she holds him at arm's length. "My, what a pretty picture!"

"They wanted me," he says, and his teeth are chattering. "*Why?*"

She looks up at him seriously. "You must bathe. Then have coffee. We are not at home, oui?"

"Ah, oui." He looks down. Aineko is sitting up, looking dazed. "Shower. Then that dispatch for CIA news."

"The dispatch?" She looks puzzled. "I filed that last night. When I was in the shower. The microphone, he is waterproof."

By the time Arianespace's security contractors show up, Manfred has stripped off Annette's evening gown—shaking his head, *what was I* on?—and showered; he's sitting in the living room wearing a bathrobe, drinking a half-liter mug of espresso and swearing under his breath.

While he was dancing the night away in Annette's arms, the global reputation market has gone nonlinear; people are putting their trust in the Christian Coalition and the Eurocommunist Alliance—always a sign that the times are bad—while perfectly sound trading enterprises have gone into free fall, as if a major bribery scandal has broken out. This is bad news for Manfred, who essentially earns his living by traveling the world, inventing cool intellectual properties, and giving them away in such a manner that they contribute as much to the commons as to their immediate recipients.

Manfred is a classic agalmic entrepreneur: he trades ideas for kudos via the Free Intellect Foundation, bastard child of George Soros and Richard Stallman. *His* reputation is cemented by donations to the public good that don't backfire; being caught on the wrong side of the bed is a non-issue. So he's offended and startled to discover that he's dropped twenty points in the past two hours—and frightened to see that this is by no means unusual. He was expecting a ten-point drop mediated via an options trade—payment for the use of the anonymous luggage remixer that routed his old suitcase to Mombasa and in return sent this new one to him via the left-luggage office in Luton—but this is more serious; the entire reputation market seems to have been hit by the confidence flu.

Annette bustles around busily, pointing out angles and timings to the forensics team. She seems more angry and shaken than worried by the intrusion; it's probably an occupational hazard in her line of work, as an upward-rising executive in the old, grasping network of greed that Manfred's agalmic future aims to supplant. The forensics dude and dudette, a pair of cute, tanned Lebanese youngsters, point the yellow snout of their mass spectroscope into various corners and agree that there's something not unlike gun oil in the air. But, so sorry, the intruders wore masks to trap the skin particles, so there's no way of getting a genotype match, and they left nothing on the door handles. Presently they agree to log it as a suspected corporate intrusion (origin: unclassified; severity: worrying) and increase the logging level on her kitchen telemetry. And remember to wear your earrings at all times, please. They leave, and Annette locks the door, leans against it, and curses for a whole long minute.

"They gave me a message from the copyright control agency," Manfred says unevenly when she winds down. "Russian gangsters from New York bought the recording cartels a few years ago after the software industry won the lawsuits over MP3 downloads. They add a whole new meaning to copy protection: this was just a polite cease-and-desist notice by their standards. They run the record shops and they *try* to block any music distribution channel they don't own. Not very successfully, though—most gangsters are living in the past, more conservative than any normal businessman can afford to be. What was it that you put on the wire?"

Annette closes her eyes. "I don't remember. No." She holds up a hand.

"Open mike. I streamed you into a file and cut, cut out the bits about me." She opens her eyes and shakes her head. "What was I *on?*"

"You don't know either?"

He stands up and she walks over and throws her arms around him. "I was on *you,*" she murmurs.

"Bullshit." He pulls away, then sees how this upsets her. Something is blinking for attention in his glasses; he's been off-line for the best part of six hours and is getting a panicky butterfly stomach at the idea of not being in touch with everything that's happened in the last twenty kiloseconds. "I need to know more. *Something* in that report rattled the wrong cages. Or someone ratted on the suitcase exchange—I meant the dispatch to be a heads-up for whoever needs a working state-planning system, not an invitation to shoot me!"

"Well, then." She lets go of him. "Do your work." Coolly: "I'll be around."

He realizes now that he's hurt her, but he doesn't see any way of explaining that he didn't mean to—at least, not without working himself in deeper. He finishes his croissant and plunges into one of those unavoidable fits of deep interaction, fingers twitching on invisible keypads and eyeballs jiggling as his glasses funnel deep media straight into his skull through the highest bandwidth channel currently available.

One of his email accounts is halfway to the moon with automatic messages, companies with names like agalmic.holdings.root.8E.F0 screaming for the attention of their transitive director. Each of these companies—and there are currently more than sixteen thousand of them, although the herd is growing day by day—has three directors and is the director of three other companies. Each of them executes a script in a functional language Manfred invented; the directors tell the company what to do, and the instructions include orders to pass instructions on to their children. In effect, they are a flock of cellular automata, like the cells in Conway's Game of Life, only far more complex and powerful.

Manfred's companies form a programmable grid. Some of them are armed with capital in the form of patents Manfred filed and then delegated rather than passing on to the Free Intellect Foundation; some of them are effectively non-trading, but occupy directorial roles. Their corporate functions (such as filing of accounts and voting in new directors) are all handled centrally through his company operating framework, and their trading is carried out via several of the more popular B2B enabler dot-coms. Internally, the companies do other, more obscure load-balancing computations, processing resource-allocation problems like a classic state central-planning system. None of which explains why fully half of them have been hit by random lawsuits in the past twenty-two hours.

The lawsuits are . . . *random.* That's the only pattern Manfred can detect. Some of them allege patent infringements; these he might take seriously, except that about a third of the targets are director companies that don't actually do anything visible to the public. A few lawsuits allege mis-management, but then there's a whole bizarre raft of spurious nonsense: suits for wrongful dismissal or age discrimination—against companies with no employees—complaints about reckless trading, and an action alleging that the defendant (in conspiracy with the prime minister of Japan, the government of Canada, and the Emir of Kuwait) is using orbital mind-control lasers to make the plaintiff's pet chihuahua bark at all hours of the day and night.

Manfred groans and does a quick calculation. At the current rate, lawsuits are hitting his corporate grid at a rate of one every sixteen seconds—up from none in the preceding six months. In another day, this is going to saturate him. If it keeps up for a week, it'll saturate every court in the United States. *Someone* has found a means to do for lawsuits what he's doing for companies—and they've chosen him as their target.

To say that Manfred is unamused is an understatement. If he weren't already preoccupied with Annette's emotional state and edgy from the intrusion, he'd be livid—but he's still human enough that he responds to human stimuli first. So he determines to do something about it, but he's still flashing on the floating gun, her cross-dressing cool.

Transgression, sex, and networks; these are all on his mind when Mr. Glashwiecz phones.

"Hello?" Manfred answers distractedly; he's busy pondering the lawsuit 'bot that's attacking his systems.

"Macx! The elusive Mister Macx!" Glashwiecz sounds positively overjoyed to have tracked down his target. Manfred winces.

"Who is this?" he asks.

"I called you yesterday," says the lawyer; "you should have listened." He chortles horribly. "Now I have you!"

Manfred holds the phone away from his face, like something poisonous. "I'm recording this," he warns. "Who the hell are you and what do you want?"

"Your wife has retained my partnership's services to pursue her interests in your divorce case. When I called you yesterday, it was to point out that your options are running out. I have an order, signed in court three days ago, to have all your assets frozen. These ridiculous shell companies notwithstanding, she's going to take you for exactly what you owe her. After tax, of course. She's very insistent on that point."

Manfred glances round, puts his phone on hold for a moment: "Where's my suitcase?" he asks Aineko. The cat sidles away, ignoring him. "Shit." He can't see the new luggage anywhere: it's probably on its way to Morocco by now, complete with its priceless cargo of high-density information. He returns his attention to the phone. Glashwiecz is droning on about equitable settlements, cumulative IRS tax demands—that seem to have materialized out of fantasy with Pam's imprimatur on them—and the need to make a clean breast of things in court and confess to his sins. "Where's the fucking suitcase?" He takes the phone off hold. "Shut the fuck up, please, I'm trying to think."

"I'm not going to shut up! You're on the court docket already, Macx. You can't evade your responsibilities forever. You've got a wife and a helpless daughter to care for—"

"A daughter?" That cuts right through Manfred's preoccupation with the suitcase.

"Didn't you know?" Glashwiecz sounds pleasantly surprised. "She was decanted on Sunday. Perfectly healthy, I'm told. I thought you knew; you have visiting rights via the clinic webcam. Anyway. I'll just leave you with this thought, the sooner you come to a settlement the sooner I can unfreeze your companies. Goodbye."

The suitcase rolls into view, peeping coyly out from behind Annette's dressing table. Manfred beckons to it; right now it's easier to deal with his Plan B than dawn raids by objectivist gangsters, Annette's sulk, his wife's incessant legal spamming, and the news that he is a father against his will. "C'mon over here, you stray baggage. Let's see what I got for my reputation derivatives."

* * *

Anticlimax.

Annette's communiqué is anodyne; a giggling confession off-camera (shower-curtain rain in the background) that the famous Manfred Macx is in Paris for a weekend of clubbing, drugging, and general hell-raising. Oh, and he's promised to invent three new paradigm shifts before breakfast every day, starting with a way to actualize the arrival of True Communism by building a state central-planning apparatus that interfaces perfectly with external market systems and somehow manages to algorithmically outperform the Monte Carlo free-for-all of market economics. Just because he *can,* because hacking economics is fun and he wants to hear the screams from the Chicago school.

Try as he may, Manfred can't see anything in the press release that is at all unusual. It's just the sort of thing he does, and getting it on the net was why he was looking for a CIA stringer in the first place.

He tries to explain this to her in the bath as he soaps her back. "I don't understand what they're on about," he complains. "There's nothing that tipped them off—except that I was in Paris, and you filed the news. You did *nothing* wrong."

"Mais oui." She turns round, slippery as an eel, and slides backward into the water. "I try to tell you this but you are not listening."

"I am now." Water droplets cling to the outside of his glasses, plastering his view of the room with laser speckle highlights. "I'm sorry, Annette. I brought this mess with me. I can take it out of your life."

"No!" She rises up in front of him and leans forward, face serious. "I said yesterday. I want to be your manager. Take me in."

"I don't need a manager; my whole thing is about being fast and out-of-control!"

"You think you do not *need* a manager, but your companies do," she observes. "You have lawsuits, how many? You cannot the time to oversee them spare. The Soviets, they abolish capitalists, but even they need managers. Please, let me manage for you!"

Annette is so intense about the idea that she becomes visibly aroused. He leans toward her, cups a hand around one taut nipple. "The company matrix isn't sold yet," he admits.

"It is not?" She looks delighted. "Excellent! To who can this be sold, to Moscow? To SLORC? To—"

"I was thinking of the Italian Communist Party," he says. "It's a pilot project. I was working on selling it—need the money for my divorce, to close the deal on the luggage—but it's not that simple. Someone has to run the damn thing—someone with a keen understanding of how to interface a central-planning system with a capitalist economy. A system administrator with experience of working for a multinational corporation would be ideal, one with an interest in finding new ways and means of interfacing the centrally planned enterprise to the outside world." He looks at her with suddenly dawning surmise. "Um. You interested?"

Rome is hotter than downtown Columbia, SC over Thanksgiving weekend; it stinks of methane-burning Skodas with a low undertone of cooked dogshit. The cars are brightly colored subcompact missiles, hurtling in and out of alleyways like angry wasps: hot-wiring their drive-by-wire seems to be the national sport, although Fiat's embedded-systems people have always written notoriously wobbly software.

Manfred emerges from the Stazione Termini into dusty sunlight, blinking like an owl. His glasses keep up a rolling monologue about who lived where in the days of the late Republic; they're stuck on a tourist channel and won't come unglued from that much history without a struggle. Manfred doesn't feel like a struggle right now. He feels like he's been sucked dry over the weekend: a light, hollow husk that might blow away in a stiff breeze. He hasn't had a patentable idea all day. This is not a good state to be in on a Monday morning when he's due to meet the former Minister for Economic Affairs in an hour and a half, in order to give him a gift that will probably get the minister a shot at higher office, and get Pam's lawyer off his back for good.

The ex-Minister's private persona isn't what Manfred was expecting. All Manfred has seen up to now is a polished public avatar in a traditionally cut suit, addressing the Chamber of Deputies in cyberspace: which is why when he rings the doorbell set in the whitewashed doorframe of Gianni's front door, he isn't expecting a piece of Tom of Finland beefcake, complete with breechcloth and peaked leather cap, to answer.

"Hello, I am here to see the minister," Manfred says carefully. Aineko, perched on his left shoulder, attempts to translate: it trills something that sounds extremely urgent. *Everything* sounds urgent in Italian.

"It's okay, I'm from Iowa," says the guy in the doorway. He tucks a thumb under one leather strap and grins over his mustache: "What's it about?" Over his shoulder: "Gianni! Visitor!"

"It's about the economy," Manfred says carefully. "I'm here to make it obsolete."

The beefcake backs away from the door cautiously—then the minister appears behind him. "Ah, signore Macx! It's okay, Johnny, I have been expecting him." Gianni extends a rapid welcome, like a hyperactive gnome buried in a white toweling bathrobe: "Please come in, my friend! I'm sure you must be tired from your journey. A refreshment for the guest if you please, Johnny. Would you prefer coffee or something stronger?"

Five minutes later Manfred is buried up to his ears in a sofa covered in buttery white cowhide, a cup of virulently strong espresso balanced precariously on his knee, while Gianni Vittoria himself holds forth on the problems of implementing a postindustrial ecosystem on top of a bureaucratic system with its roots in the bull-headedly modernist era of the 1920s. Gianni is a visionary of the left, a strange attractor within the chaotic phase-space of Italian politics. A former professor of Marxist economics, his ideas are informed by a painfully honest humanism, and everyone—even his enemies—agrees that he is one of the greatest theoreticians of the post-EU era. But his intellectual integrity prevents him from rising to the very top, and his fellow-travelers are much ruder about him than his ideological enemies, accusing him of the ultimate political crime: valuing truth over power.

Manfred met Gianni a couple of years ago via a hosted politics chatroom; at the beginning of last week, he sent him a paper detailing his embeddable planned economy and a proposal for using it to turbocharge the endless Italian attempt to re-engineer its government systems. This is the thin end of the wedge: if Manfred is right, it could catalyze a whole new wave of communist expansion, driven by humanitarian ideals and demonstrably superior performance, rather than wishful thinking and ideology.

"It is impossible, I fear. This is Italy, my friend: everybody has to have their say. Not everybody even understands what it is we are talking about, but that won't stop them talking about it. Since 1945, our government requires consensus—a reaction to what came before. Do you know we have five different routes to putting forward a new law, two of them added as emergency measures to break the gridlock? And none of them work on their own unless you can get everybody to agree. Your plan is daring and radical but if it works, we must understand why *we* work—and that digs right to the root of being human, and not everybody will agree."

At this point, Manfred realizes that he's lost. "I don't understand," he says, genuinely puzzled. "What has the human condition got to do with economics?"

The minister sighs abruptly. "You are very unusual. You earn no money, do you? But you are rich, because grateful people who have benefited from your work give you everything you need. You are like a mediaeval troubadour who has found favor with the aristocracy. Your labor is not alienated—it is given freely, and your means of production with you always, inside your head." Manfred blinks; the jargon is weirdly technical-sounding but orthogonal to his experience, offering him a disquieting glimpse into the world of the terminally future-shocked. He is surprised to find that not understanding *itches.*

Gianni taps his balding temple with a knuckle like a walnut. "Most people spend little time inside their head. They don't understand how you live. They're like mediaeval peasants looking in puzzlement at the troubadour. This system you invent, for running a planned economy, is delightful and elegant: Lenin's heirs would have been awe-struck. But it is not a system for the new century. It is not *human.*"

Manfred scratches his head. "It seems to me that there's nothing human about the economics of scarcity," He says. "Anyway, humans will be obsolete as economic units within a couple more decades. All I want to do is make everybody rich beyond their wildest dreams before that happens." A pause for a sip of coffee, and to think *one honest statement deserves another*: "and to pay off a divorce settlement."

"Ye-es? Well, let me show you my library, my friend," Gianni says, standing up. "This way."

The older man ambles out of the predominantly white living room with its carnivorous leather sofas and up a cast-iron spiral staircase that nails some kind of upper level onto the base of the building. "Human beings aren't rational," he calls over his shoulder. "That was the big mistake of the Chicago school economists, neo-liberals to a man, and of my predecessors, too. If human behavior were logical, there would be no gambling, hmm? The house always wins, after all." The staircase debouches into another airy whitewashed room, where one wall is occupied by a wooden bench supporting a number of ancient, promiscuously cabled servers and a very new, eye-wateringly expensive solid volume renderer. Opposite the bench is a wall occupied from floor to ceiling by bookcases: Manfred looks at the ancient, low-density medium and sneezes, momentarily bemused by the sight of data density measured in kilograms per megabyte rather than vice versa.

"What's it fabbing?" Manfred asks, pointing at the renderer, which is whining to itself and slowly sintering together something that resembles a carriage clock maker's fever dream of a clockwork-powered hard disk drive.

"Oh, one of Johnny's toys: a micromechanical digital phonograph player," Gianni says dismissively. "He used to design Babbage engines for the Pentagon: stealth computers. (No Van Eck radiation, you know.) Look." He carefully pulls a fabric-bound document out of the obsolescent data wall and shows the spine to Manfred: "*On the Theory of Games,* by John Von Neumann. Signed first edition."

Aineko meeps and dumps a slew of confusing purple finite state automata into Manfred's left eye: the hardback is dusty and dry beneath his fingertips as he remembers to turn the pages gently. "This copy belonged to the personal library of Oleg Kordiovsky. A lucky man is Oleg: he bought it in 1952, while on a visit to New York, and the MVD let him to keep it."

"He must be—" Manfred pauses. More data, historical timelines. "GosPlan?"

"Correct." Gianni smiles thinly. "Two years before the central committee denounced computers as bourgeois deviationist pseudo-science intended to dehumanize the proletarian. They recognized the power of robots even then. A shame they do not anticipate the compiler or the net."

"I don't understand the significance. Nobody back then could expect that the main obstacle to doing away with the market would be overcome within half a century, surely?"

"Indeed not. But it's true: since the nineteen-eighties, it has been possible—in principle—to resolve resource allocation problems algorithmically, by computer, instead of needing a market. Markets are wasteful: they allow competition, much of which is thrown on the scrap heap. So why do they persist?"

Manfred shrugs. "You tell me. Conservatism?"

Gianni closes the book and puts it back on the shelf. "Markets afford their participants the illusion of *free will,* my friend. You will find that human beings do not like being forced into doing something, even if it is in their best interests. Of necessity, a command economy must be coercive—it does, after all, command."

"But my system doesn't! It mediates where supplies go, not who has to produce what—"

Gianni is shaking his head. "Backward chaining or forward chaining, it is still an expert system, my friend. Your companies need no human beings, and this is a good thing, but they must not *direct* the activities of human beings, either. If they do, you have just enslaved people to an abstract machine, as dictators have throughout history."

Manfred's eyes scan along the bookshelf. "But the market itself is an abstract machine! A lousy one, too. I'm mostly free of it—but how long is it going to continue oppressing people?"

"Maybe not as long as you fear." Gianni sits down next to the renderer, which is currently extruding the inference mill of the analytical engine. "The marginal value of money decreases, after all: the more you have, the less it means to you. We are on the edge of a period of prolonged economic growth, with annual averages in excess of 20 percent if the Council of Europe's predictor metrics are anything to go by. The last of the flaccid industrial economy has withered away, and this era's muscle of economic growth, what used to be the high-technology sector, is now everything. We can afford a little wastage, my friend, if that is the price of keeping people happy until the marginal value of money withers away completely."

Realization dawns. "You want to abolish scarcity, not just money!"

"Indeed." Gianni grins. "There's more to that than mere economic performance; you have to consider abundance as a factor. Don't plan the economy; take things *out* of the economy. Do you pay for the air you breathe? No. Now, do you want to know how you can pay for your divorce settlement?"

The shutters are thrown back, the curtains tied out of the way, and Annette's huge living room windows are drawn open in the morning breeze.

Manfred sits on a leather-topped piano stool, his suitcase open at his feet. He's running a firewire link from the case to Annette's stereo, an antique standalone SDMI unit with a satellite internet uplink. Someone has chipped it, crudely revoking its copy-protection algorithm: the back of its case bears scars from their soldering iron. Annette is curled up on the huge sofa, wrapped in a caftan and a pair of high bandwidth goggles, taking a break from his scheme to thrash out an Arianespace scheduling problem with some colleagues in Iran and Guyana.

His suitcase is full of noise, but what's coming out of the stereo is ragtime. Subtract entropy from a data stream—coincidentally uncompressing it—and what's left is information. With a capacity of about a trillion terabytes, the suitcase's holographic storage reservoir has enough capacity to hold every music, film, and video production of the twentieth century with room to spare. This is all stuff that is effectively out of copyright control, work-for-hire owned by bankrupt companies, released before the CCAA could make their media clampdown stick. Manfred is streaming the music through Annette's stereo—but keeping the noise it was convoluted with. High-grade entropy is valuable. . . .

Presently, Manfred sighs and pushes his glasses up his forehead, killing the displays. He's thought his way around every permutation of what's going on, and it looks like Gianni was right: there's nothing left to do but wait for everyone to show up.

For a moment, he feels old and desolate, as slow as an unassisted human mind. Agencies have been swapping in and out of his head for the past day, ever since he got back from Rome; he's developed a butterfly attention span, irritable and unable to focus on anything while the information streams fight it out for control of his cortex, arguing about a solution to his predicament. Annette is putting up with his mood swings surprisingly calmly; he's not sure why, but he glances her way fondly. Her obsessions run surprisingly deep, and she's quite clearly using him for her own purposes. So why does he feel more comfortable around her than he ever did with Pam?

She stretches and pushes her goggles up. "Oui?"

"I was just thinking." He smiles. "Three days and you haven't told me what I should be doing with myself yet."

She pulls a face. "Why would I do that?"

"Oh, no reason. I'm just not over—" he shrugs uncomfortably. There it is, an inexplicable absence in his life: but not one he feels he urgently needs to fill yet. Is this what a relationship between equals feels like? He's not sure; starting with the occlusive cocooning of his upbringing and continuing through all his adult relationships, he's been effectively—voluntarily—dominated by his partners. Maybe the anti-submissive conditioning is working, after all. But if so, why this creative malaise? Why isn't he coming up with original new ideas this week? Could it be that his peculiar brand of creativity is an outlet, that he needs the pressure of being lovingly enslaved to make him burst out into a great flowering of imaginative brilliance?

Annette stands up and walks over, slowly. He looks at her and feels lust and affection, and isn't sure whether or not this is love. "When are they due?" she asks, leaning over him.

"Any—" the doorbell chimes.

"Ah. I will get that." She stalks away, opens the door.

"You!"

Manfred's head snaps round as if he's on a leash. *Her* leash: but he wasn't expecting her to come in person.

"Yes, me," Annette says easily. "Come in. Be my guest."

Pam enters the apartment living room with flashing eyes, her tame lawyer in tow. "Well, look what the robot kitty dragged in," she drawls, fixing Manfred with an expression that owes more to contempt than to humor.

Manfred rises: for a moment, he's transfixed by the sight of his dominatrix wife, and his—mistress? conspirator?—side by side. The contrast is marked: Annette's expression of ironic amusement a foil for Pamela's angry sincerity. Somewhere behind them stands a balding middle-aged man in a suit, carrying a folio: just the kind of diligent serf Pam would have turned him into, given time. Manfred musters up a smile. "Can I offer you some coffee?" he asks. "The party of the third part seems to be late."

"Coffee would be great, mine's dark, no sugar," twitters the lawyer. He puts his briefcase down on a side table and fiddles with his wearable until a light begins to blink from his spectacle frames: "I'm recording this, I'm sure you understand."

Annette sniffs and heads for the kitchen, which is charmingly manual but not very efficient: Pam is pretending she doesn't exist. "Well, well, well." She shakes her head. "I'd expected better of you than a French tart's boudoir, Manny. And before the divorce's even settled."

"I'm surprised you're not in the hospital," he says. "I gather post-natal recovery is outsourced these days?"

"The employers." She slips her long coat off her shoulders and hangs it behind the broad wooden door. "They subsidize everything when you reach my grade." Pamela is tall, ash-blonde, with features that speak of an unexplored modeling career. She's wearing a very short, very expensive dress, the kind of weapon in the war between the sexes that ought to come with an end-user certificate: but to his surprise it has no effect on him. He realizes that he's completely unable to evaluate her gender: it's almost as if she's become a member of another species. "As you'd be aware if you'd been paying attention."

"I always pay attention, Pam," he says: "it's the only currency I carry."

"Very droll, ha ha," interrupts Glashwiecz, the lawyer. "You do realize that you're paying me while I stand here listening to this fascinating by-play?"

Manfred stares at him: "You know I don't have any money."

"Ah." Glashwiecz smiles. "But you must be mistaken. Certainly the judge will agree with me that you must be mistaken—all a lack of paper documentation means is that you've covered your trail. There's the small matter of the several thousand corporations you own, indirectly: somewhere at the bottom of that pile there's got to be something, hasn't there?"

A hissing, burbling noise like a sackful of large lizards being drowned in mud emanates from the kitchen, suggesting that Annette's percolator is nearly ready. Manfred's left hand twitches, playing chords on an air keyboard: without being at all obvious, he's releasing a bulletin about his current activities that should soon have an effect on the reputation marketplace. Manfred heads for the sofa. "Your attack was rather elegant," he comments, as Pam disappears into the kitchen.

Glashwiecz nods. "The idea was one of my interns'," he says. "I don't understand this distributed denial of service stuff, but Lisa grew up on it. Something about it being a legal travesty, but workable all the same."

"Uh-huh." Manfred's opinion of the lawyer drops a notch. He notices Pam re-appearing from the kitchen, her expression icy; a moment later Annette surfaces carrying a jug and some cups, beaming innocently. Something's going on, but at that moment one of his agents nudges him urgently in the left ear, his suitcase keens mournfully and beams a sense of utter despair at him, and the doorbell rings again.

"So what's the scam?" Glashwiecz sits down uncomfortably close to Manfred and murmurs out of one side of his mouth. "Where's the money?"

Manfred looks at him irritably: "There *is* no money," he says. "The idea is to make money *obsolete*. Hasn't she explained that?" His eyes wander, taking in the lawyer's Philippe Patek watch, his Java-enabled signet ring.

"C'mon. Don't give me that line. Look, all it takes is a couple of million and you can buy your way free for all I care. All I'm here for is to see that your wife and daughter don't get left penniless and starving. You know and I know that you've got bags of it stuffed away—just look at your reputation! You didn't get that by standing at the roadside with a begging bowl, did you?"

Manfred snorts. "You're talking about an elite IRS auditor here. She isn't penniless; she gets a commission on every poor bastard she takes to the cleaners and she was born with a trust fund. Me, I—" The stereo bleeps. Manfred pulls his glasses on. Whispering ghosts of dead artists hum through his ear lobes, urgently demanding their freedom. Someone knocks at the door again and he glances round to see Annette walking toward it.

"You're making it hard on yourself," Glashwiecz warns.

"Expecting company?" Pam asks, one brittle eyebrow raised in Manfred's direction.

"No—"

Annette opens the door and a couple of guards in full SWAT gear march in. They're clutching gadgets that look like a cross between a digital sewing machine and a grenade launcher, and their helmets are studded with so many sensors that they resemble nineteen-fifties space probes. "That's them," Annette says clearly.

"*Mais oui.*" The door closes itself and the guards stand to either side. Annette stalks toward Pam.

"You think to walk in here, to my pied-a-terre, and take from Manfred?" She snorts.

"You're making a big mistake, lady," Pam says, her voice steady and cold enough to liquefy helium.

A burst of static from one of the troopers. "No," Annette says distantly. "No mistake."

She points at Glashwiecz. "Are you aware of the takeover?"

"Takeover?" The lawyer looks puzzled, but not alarmed by the presence of the guards.

"As of three hours ago," Manfred says quietly, "I sold a controlling interest in agalmic.holdings.root.1.1.1 to Athene Accelerants BV, a venture capital outfit from Maastricht. One dot one dot one is the root node of the central planning tree. Athene aren't your usual VC, they're accelerants—they take explosive business plans and detonate them." Glashwiecz is looking pale: whether with anger or fear of a lost commission is impossible to tell. "Actually, Athene Accelerants are owned by a shell company owned by the Italian Communist Party's pension trust. The point is, you're in the presence of one dot one dot one's chief operations officer."

Pam looks annoyed. "Peurile attempts to dodge responsibility—"

Annette clears her throat. "Exactly *who* do you think you are trying to sue?" she asks Glashwiecz sweetly. "Here we have laws about unfair restraint of trade. Also about foreign political interference, specifically in the financial affairs of an Italian party of government."

"You wouldn't—"

"I would." Manfred brushes his hands on his knees and stands up. "Done yet?" he asks the suitcase.

Muffled beeps, then a gravelly synthesized voice speaks: "Uploads completed."

"Ah, good." He grins at Annette. "Time for our next. . . ?"

On cue, the doorbell rings again. The guards sidle to either side of the door. Annette snaps her fingers and the door opens to admit a pair of smartly dressed thugs. It's beginning to get crowded in the living room.

"Which one of you is Macx?" snaps the older one of the two thugs, staring at Glashwiecz for no obvious reason. He hefts an aluminum briefcase. "Got a writ to serve."

"You'd be the CCAA?" asks Manfred.

"You bet. If you're Macx, I have a restraining order—"

Manfred raises a hand. "It's not me you want," he says. "It's *this* lady." He points at Pam, whose mouth opens in silent protest. "Y'see, the intellectual property you're chasing wants to be free. It's so free that it's now administered by a complex set of corporate instruments lodged in the Netherlands, and the prime shareholder as of approximately four minutes ago is my soon-to-be-ex-wife Pamela, here." He winks at Glashwiecz. "Except she doesn't *control* anything."

"Just *what* do you think you're playing at, Manfred?" Pamela snarls, unable to contain herself any longer. The guards shuffle: the larger, junior CCAA enforcer tugs at his boss's jacket nervously.

"Well." Manfred picks up his coffee and takes a sip. Grimaces. "Pam wanted a divorce settlement, didn't she? The most valuable assets I own are the rights to a whole bunch of recategorized work-for-hire that slipped through the CCAA's fingers a few years back. Part of the twentieth century's cultural heritage that got locked away by the music industry in the last decade; Janis Joplin, the Doors, that sort of thing. Artists who weren't around to defend themselves any more. When the music cartels went bust, the rights went for a walk. I took them over originally with the idea of setting the music free. Giving it back to the public domain, as it were."

Annette nods at the guards, one of whom nods back and starts muttering and buzzing into a throat mike. Manfred continues. "I was working on a solution to the central planning paradox—how to interface a centrally planned enclave to a market economy. My good friend Gianni Vittoria suggested that such a shell-game could have alternative uses. So I've *not* freed the music. Instead, I signed the rights over to various actors and threads running inside the agalmic holdings network—currently one million, forty-eight thousand, five hundred and seventy-five companies. They swap rights rapidly—the rights to any given song are resident in a given company for, oh, all of fifty milliseconds at a time. Now understand, I don't own these companies. I don't even have a financial interest in them any more. I've deeded my share of the profits to Pam, here."

He takes another mouthful of coffee. The recording mafiya goon glares at him. Pam glares at him. Annette stands against one wall, looking amused. "Perhaps you'd like to sort it out between you?" he asks. Aside, to Glashwiecz: "I trust you'll drop your denial of service attack before I set the Italian parliament on you? By the way, you'll find the book value of the intellectual property assets I deeded to Pamela—by the value *these* gentlemen place on them—is somewhere in excess of a billion dollars. As that's rather more than ninety-nine-point-nine percent of my assets you'll probably want to look elsewhere for your fees."

Glashwiecz stands up carefully. The lead goon stares at Pamela. "Is this true?" he demands. "This little squirt give you IP assets of Sony Music? We have claim! You come to us for distribution or you get in deep trouble!"

The second goon rumbles agreement: "Remember, dose MP3's, dey bad for you health!"

Annette claps her hands. "If you would to leave my apartment, please." The door, attentive as ever, swings open: "You are no longer welcome here!"

"This means you," Manfred advises Pam, helpfully.

"You *bastard!*" she spits at him.

Manfred forces a smile, bemused by his inability to respond to her the way she wants. "I thought you *wanted* my assets? Are the encumbrances too much for you?"

"You know what I mean! You and that two-bit euro-whore! I'll get you for child neglect!"

His smile freezes. "Try it and I'll sue you for breach of patent rights. My genome, you understand."

Pam is taken aback by this. "You patented your *own* genome? What happened to the brave new communist, sharing information freely?"

Manfred stops smiling. "Divorce happened."

She turns on her heel and stalks out of his life, tame attorney in tow behind her, muttering about class-action lawsuits and violations of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. The CCAA lawyer's tame gorilla makes a grab for Glashwiecz's shoulder and the guards move in, hustling the whole movable feast out into the stairwell. The door slides shut on a chaos of impending recursive lawsuits, and Manfred breathes a huge wheeze of relief.

Annette walks over to him and leans her chin on the top of his head. "Think it will work?" she asks.

"Well. The CCAA will sue the hell out of the company network for a while if they try to distribute by any channel that isn't controlled by the Mafiya. Pam gets rights to all the music, her settlement, but she can't sell it without going through the mob. And I got to serve notice on that legal shark: if he tries to take me on, he's got to be politically bulletproof. Hmm. Maybe I ought not to plan on going back to the USA this side of the singularity."

"Profits." Annette sighs. "I do not easily understand this way of yours. Or this apocalyptic obsession with the singularity."

"Remember the old aphorism, if you love something, set it free? I freed the music."

"But you didn't! You signed rights over—"

"But first I uploaded the entire stash to Eternity and several other cryptographically anonymized public network filesystems over the past few hours, so there'll be rampant piracy. But that's not the *point.* The point is abundance. The mafiya *can't* stop it being distributed. Pam is welcome to her cut if she can figure an angle—but I bet she can't; she still believes in classical economics, one minus one equals zero. Information doesn't work that way. What matters is that people will be able to hear the music; instead of a Soviet central planning system I've turned the network into a firewall to protect freed intellectual property."

"Oh, Manfred. You hopeless idealist." She strokes his shoulder. "Whatever for?"

"It's not just the music. When we develop a working AI we'll need a way of defending it against legal threats—"

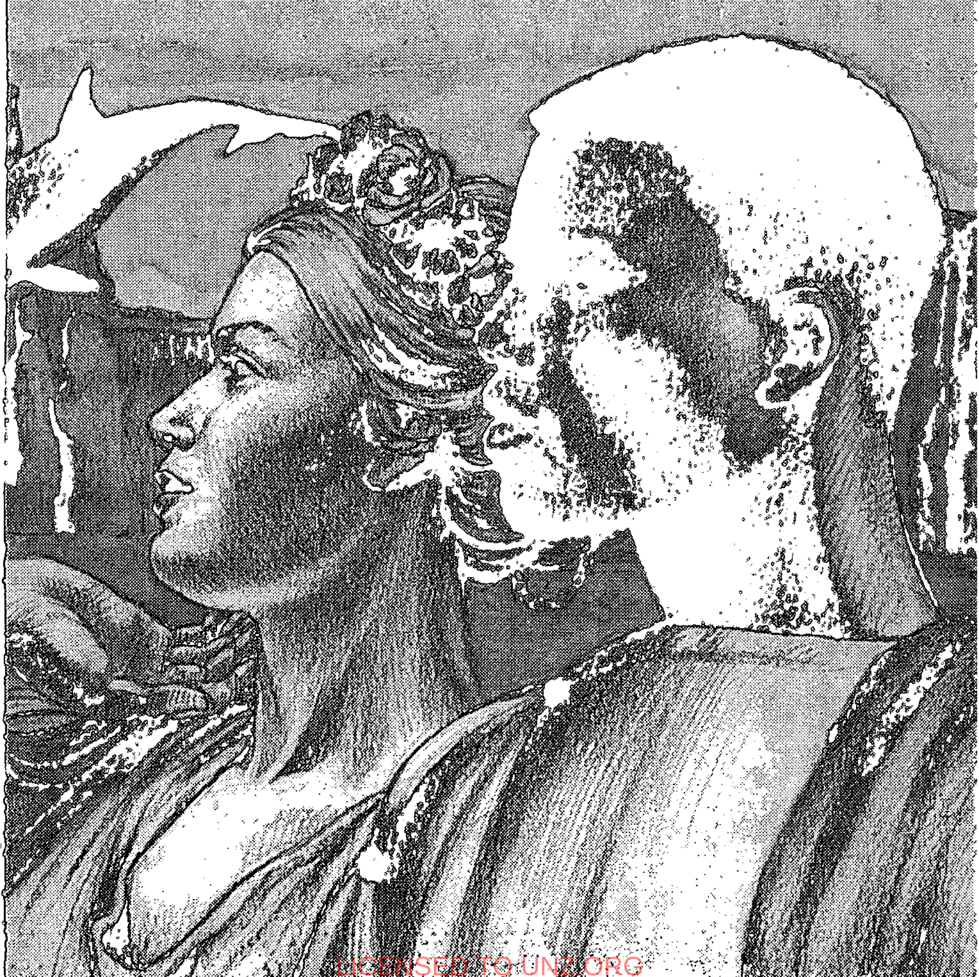
He's still explaining to her how he's laying the foundations for the transhuman explosion due early in the next decade when she picks him up in both arms, carries him to her bedroom, and commits outrageous acts of tender intimacy with him. But that's okay. He's still human, *this* decade. *That, too, will pass,* thinks the bulk of his metacortex: and it drifts off into the net to think deep thoughts elsewhere, leaving his meatbody to experience the ancient pleasures of the flesh set free. ○

AOTEAROA

Cherry Wilder

Illustration by Laurie Harden

Cherry Wilder was born and educated in New Zealand and moved to New South Wales, Australia, in 1954. She relocated to West Germany in 1976 with her husband Horst Grimm (1928-92), and their daughters Catherine and Louisa. She tells us, "The idea of the Hellenic world based on Benin and Africa was the inspiration for Aotearoa."



Our maternal uncle, Kritias Ngumbe, was not at home for his birthday: he had flown off to the Hawaiian Islands. Although she did not approve of globe-flitting, the idle sport of rich young people, Mother suggested that we fly after the old man and bring him his presents. Dion, my twin, could not get leave from the hospital, so we were only four in Phoebe's elegant, golden Lepido: Daiban, Phoebe, Luma, and our visitor, Hilda, a student from northern Europe. She was a girl of wildly exotic appearance: she put me in mind of a swan. Her skin was whiter than marble, her hair absolutely straight and yellow-gold in color, her eyes a pale blue, like the afternoon sky into which we had risen.

"Brother-heart," Phoebe said to me, teasing, "do you know why the uncle took off?"

"Why should Luma know?" demanded Daiban, our youngest. "He takes no interest in the family!"

"I think I do know," I replied.

I had made the discovery in the course of my work. I brought up a ten-day-old News Theater program on the nearest screen and we watched the short item from Honolulu. The Oceanographic Survey from Tokyo was beginning work in the Hauraki trench, southeast of the island continent of Nihonshu, home of the fascinating pouched fauna.

"In this area of the Taroan Ocean," said the chronist, "poets and dreamers have placed the fabled islands of Aotearoa, the Land of the Long White Cloud."

"Oh dear," said Phoebe softly. "Poor Uncle Kritias!"

"The old fool!" burst out Daiban. "Still taken with his mystical sunken islands!"

"Well, islands come and go," I said. "They do sink."

"And not only islands," said Phoebe. "Remember your geography, little brother. The Aegean was once a blind alley with no Straits of Daphne, no inviting seaway to the east. Imagine that! No Arabian Ocean but the plains of Lost Arabia."

"That's quite different," said Daiban.

"The Land of the Long White Cloud," said Hilda. "It sounds so beautiful. What is this island Aotearoa? Is it a magic place like Tir-nan-og, the island of the blessed?"

"Yes, a little," I replied. "There are many theories of where these islands lay and what kind of civilization they had. Look . . . here is an entry from a school encyclopedia."

Hilda sat before the screen and brushed back her shining hair with a gesture that stole my heart.

"Oh, it is nonsense . . ." insisted Daiban.

But he turned to another of the screens and read the entry too:

AOTEAROA, in the tradition of antiquity, a large island in the Taroan Ocean, situated near the island continent of Nihonshu. The first recorded account of Aotearoa, which is said to have been engulfed by the ocean as the result of an earthquake, appears in Voyages, *a work by the explorer poet Orpheon. According to this account, the island was described to the Athenian statesman Solon during his travels in the east by a Brahman priest who maintained that it was more than twice as large as the island of Lankha. The priest further revealed that a flourishing civilization centered on Aotearoa, reputedly about the tenth millennium Before Benin, and that the* *nation had influenced all the peoples of the southern ocean and spread its wisdom abroad to the kingdoms of Peru and Mexico and to the Confederacies of Manitou. In a later work,* Dialogues, *Orpheon records the history of Aotearoa and depicts the nation as an ideal commonwealth. Though Orpheon's descriptive material and history are probably fictional, the possibility exists that he had access to records no longer extant. The Aotearoa tradition has persisted through the centuries, and as recently as the twenty-ninth century, prominent writers, including the Bantu satirist Aphrodite Mgave, have given credence to it. In attempts to explain the tradition scholars have variously identified the island with Hawaii, Tahiti, Okinawa, and Lankha.*

"The encyclopedia is rather dry," I said. "The poets and dreamers prefer something like this!"

I touched the console again, and there was Zozoe, the popular lutenist, in a robe of gold fringes. He intoned sweetly:

"Aotearoa is the most beautiful of all lands!
From the mountains to the sea,
From the plains to the rushing rivers
There was never a land more beautiful.
Who remains to sing of your untrodden shore,
The silence of forest and lake,
The wonder of your bell-voiced birds?

"Aotearoa is the land of wisdom and of light.
The Tohungas, priests and philosophers,
Looked out upon their fair green land
From the fabled pink and white palaces,
They numbered the stars from Mount Tarawera,
They harnessed the might of the fire-mountains,
They explored the mysteries of the sea.

"Aotearoa is the lost land of our dreams,
It has descended, burning, into the sea,
It has been shaken to pieces by the angry Gods!
Yet it returns in the voices of young men,
In the grace of young women, dancing.
It can be glimpsed from afar,
Like mist upon the surface of the sea."

"Angry Gods, indeed," said Daiban. "Seriously, Luma, you don't believe a word of this rubbish, do you?"

"No," I admitted sadly.

"Recliners," said Phoebe, "we are coming in to land."

Kritias was the guest of his friend Prince Kalani. Hawaiian hospitality is well-known, and we were taken at once to a small banquet in an inner courtyard of the palace. There sat our uncle, wearing a feather cloak over his tunic. He was pleased to see us but tried not to show it. Daiban had brought him a compass in a crystal box; Phoebe had woven a belt; I gave him a miniature phonotron. When he tried it out, the voice of Zozoe sounded with his incantation to the lute: "Aotearoa is the most beautiful of all lands!" Kritias switched off the phonotron with a rueful smile.

* * *

The prince's daughter, a tall and stately woman, garlanded each guest with a lei of fragrant white flowers. She paused before Hilda, our northern girl, who had bent her head to receive the garland, and then passed on. No one could save the situation: the princess had taken Hilda for a servant or even a slave. Phoebe at once stripped off her own lei and placed it around the neck of her friend. I wondered if there had been slaves in Aotearoa. It was an evil too slowly eradicated in Benin and the Hellenic world.

After the feast, we were left alone with Kritias in a lofty room that looked out upon the ocean.

"Well, Uncle," said Daiban, "what news of the oceanographic survey?"

Kritias shook his head. He stood looking out into the mild southern night; the constellation of the Cross blazed overhead. I was reminded that as a young man my uncle had been initiated into one of the mathematical cults.

"Daiban, my dear boy," said Kritias, "surely you realize the necessity for these islands. . . ."

"Tell us," said Phoebe gently. "Tell us of Aotearoa."

"What is there to tell?" he said, still gazing out at the starry heavens. "Why should there not be a tradition of wisdom, of life-giving science? What is more beautiful than an island, a lost island, receding before us, unattainable as the days of our youth? They will find nothing in the Hauraki trench, yet Aotearoa slumbers deep down . . . its mountains, its palaces. . . . Have you read Philemon's Theory of Archetypes?"

"I have, Master Ngumbe," said Hilda. "I have searched my dreams for a reliable soul-companion. Perhaps I should seek elsewhere."

She looked directly at me. I was confused, then joyful.

"Come," I said, "we must fly back and leave our Uncle Kritias to contemplate his lost islands."

On the return flight, we were all very quiet: I sat beside Hilda. We did not even touch hands. Neither of my siblings were aware that we had fallen in love. I wondered if Dion, my other brother, my identical twin, would know when he set eyes upon me. I had always been considered very cynical, yet now it seemed that I was about to discover a new world.

"Of course," said Phoebe, "we should never forget that, technically speaking, *we* live on an island too."

We laughed, relieving tension, and looked down at the grey waters of the Tritonic Ocean. Our golden craft soared over the vast metropolitan coast of Benin, and we saw, outlined in light, the ancient towers of Atlantis. ○

TEN THINGS NOT TO SAY WHEN YOU MEET A FAMOUS SF WRITER

(after G. O. Clark)

Where do you get all those crazy ideas?

You must have made a fortune off that stuff.

I don't know why you win so many awards.
I write as well as you do.

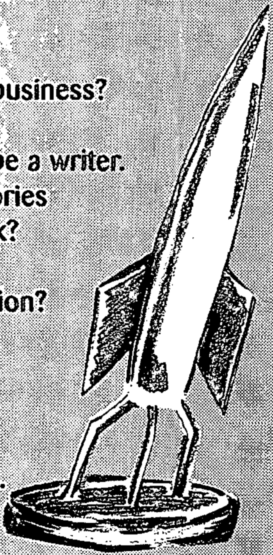
Can you sign this crate of books now?

How did you get your start?
Did you know someone in the business?

I have a brother who wants to be a writer.
Could you take a look at his stories
and let me know what you think?

Do you ever do any regular fiction?

So how come they never make
your books into movies?



I've never read anything by you.
But I hear it's pretty good.

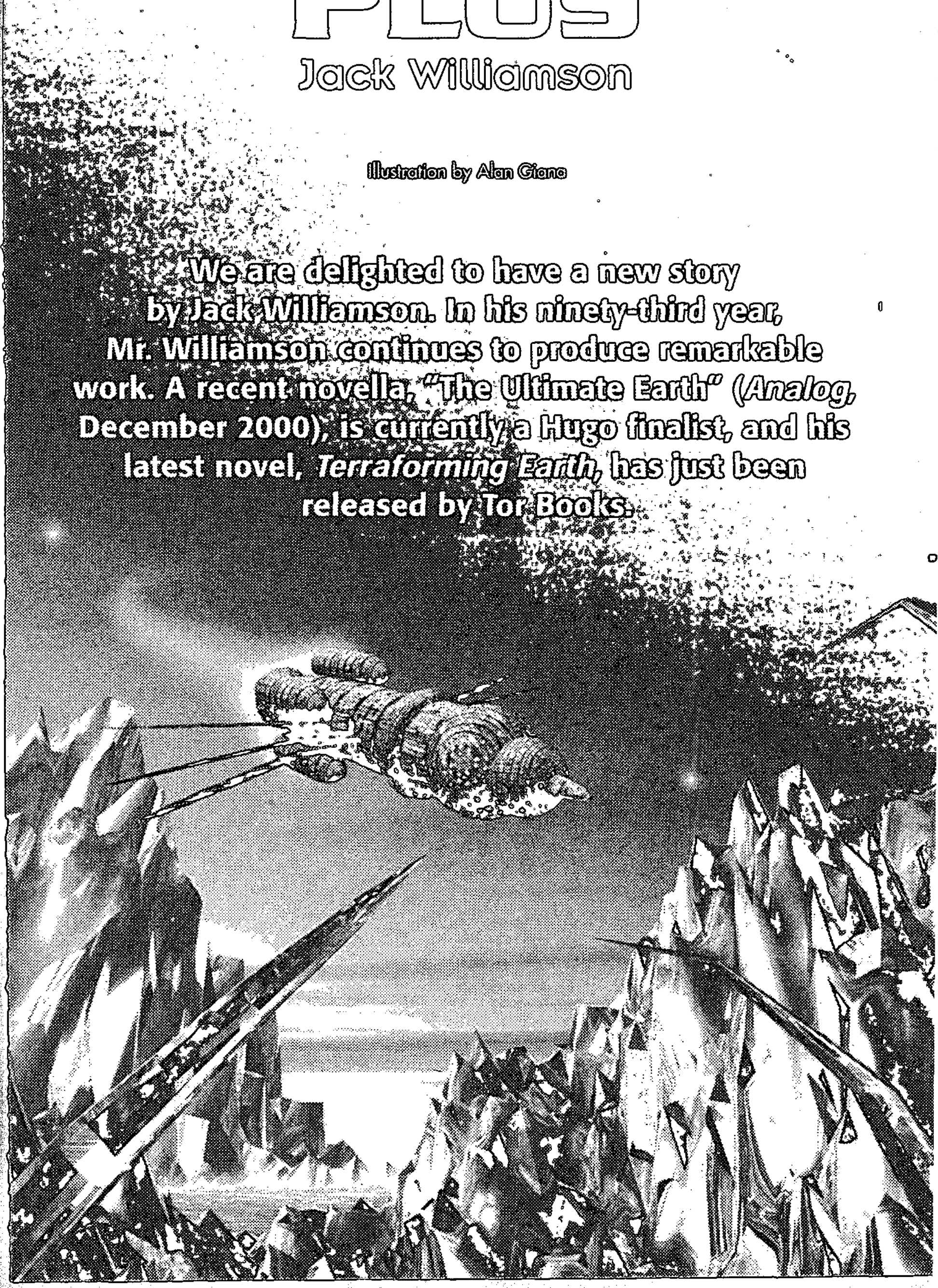
I've got this fantastic idea for a novel.
Listen to this!

—Bruce Boston

NITROGEN PLUS

Jack Williamson

Illustration by Alan Giana



We are delighted to have a new story by Jack Williamson. In his ninety-third year, Mr. Williamson continues to produce remarkable work. A recent novella, "The Ultimate Earth" (*Analog*, December 2000), is currently a Hugo finalist, and his latest novel, *Terraforming Earth*, has just been released by Tor Books.

Some optimist in the Star Survey christened the planet New Earth. It was warmed by a Sun-like star. The mass and gravity were only slightly less than Earth's, the day very slightly longer. The oceans were water, and water ice capped the poles. The surface air pressure was near Earth normal.

"A perfect world!" my uncle boasted. "Except for one odd feature. The atmosphere is nearly pure nitrogen, with a whiff of carbon dioxide but hardly a trace of oxygen. A survey lander discovered that, and never returned. Tough luck for the crew, but good news for me. I got the planet for a song."

He wanted me to terraform it.

"A slice of apple pie," he scoffed when I shrank from the problems. "Just sow the seas with engineered algae spores. Wait for photosynthesis to release oxygen out of the water."

"How long would that take?"

"What's time?" His pudgy fingers snapped the years away. "Fly home for a holiday and back there again. Ninety-seven light-years each way. Two centuries for the spores to work. Only a weekend for you, what with the relativistic time contraction. You'll have a paradise planet ready to welcome our colonists and get home again with your own ticket to immortality."

Immortality? I wanted to strangle him.

He is immortal, with his own imperial sense of time, but the members of his tight little fellowship are jealous of their secrets and slow to admit outsiders. Not that I'd longed to become his eternal handyman or abandon my own place and time for a life of interstellar adventure.

Yet he is my uncle. He's a legendary interstellar tycoon, enormously wealthy. His enemies like to paint him as a devouring octopus with a thousand arms writhing though the galaxy. As a child I had dreaded his sudden fits of rage when some unlucky flunky failed to please him. Yet I had learned to tolerate him.

Hard enough to love, he's a short, shrewd, dynamic man with a round baby face. His fat cheeks are pink and hairless from the precious micro-machines in his blood, which sharpen his wits and preserve him from illness or age. He can seem genial and generous enough, so long as you please him.

My father, two years younger, had been the unlucky brother. A disappointed idealist, a failed artist, an ill-starred lover. When my uncle offered him a chance at immortality, he refused it because he thought people should be equal. His avant-garde art found no buyers. My mother left him for another eternal. He vanished from Earth the year I was five. My uncle adopted me, sent me though expensive schools, promised me a fine future in his companies. When he named me his personal agent on New Earth, I knew I had to go.

I found a crew at the Skipper's Club. That's an ancient building inhabited by ancient starmen who run a sort of hiring hall and retirement home for skipship crews. Long halls in the basement crypt are lined with cold lockers labeled with the fading names of men and women who had planned to be back after decades or centuries to open them again.

The pilot I hired was Buzz Bates, a lanky, bald, and ageless veteran of half a hundred flights. His copilot was an anxious young apprentice who had never been beyond the solar system. I spent an evening with them in the bar, listening to his tales of desperate adventure on far-off worlds, and even here on Earth.

Home from his first voyage on the eve of the great New England disaster, he barely got off again before the impact. His birth city, ancient New York, was gone when he got back again, Atlantica standing on the site. The apprentice listened uneasily and drank too much until Bates finally had to help him up to his room.

I rented a cold crypt box for myself and left a few documents and holos I didn't want to lose. We took off in a little quantum-wave cruiser with a load of engineered algae spores and gear for their dispersal. Our staff biologist was Elena Queler. A lively brunette with a wry wit and a voice I liked. She laughed at my regrets at having to abandon all I had known.

"No grief for me! My own life had gone sour. Wrong guy living with me. Research funds dried up. Thumbs turned down on my nano-nurse project. Nitrogen or spitrogen, New Earth has got to be better than the hell I've had here."

We scanned the planet from space.

"Another Eden!" Excitement lit her piquant face. "Waiting to be created."

The seas were a pure and brilliant blue, the two great continents rimmed with bare earth in many different shades, but never a hint of green chlorophyll. Most of the land shone with a strange and brilliant white.

"Snow?" I wondered.

"In the tropics?" She laughed at the question and turned serious. "The spectrometer boggles me. Odd signatures of silicon and carbon. Not a trace of free oxygen. I want a closer look."

As we dropped closer, Pilot Bates discovered a tiny satellite in low orbit. It turned out to be the lost lander. The copilot got into space gear to go aboard. He was gone a long time.

"All dead."

Back at last, peeling off his gear, he looked sick and shaken.

"The crew. The automatics. Everything." He shivered and stood silent till Bates made him go on. "I got through the lock with a laser torch. No air inside. The bodies are freeze-dried mummies, brittle as glass. I found a quarter-ton of some queer crystal stuff they'd loaded in the cargo bay. It must have killed them."

"How?"

"Just a hunch." He shrugged and went silent for an instant. "If you'd seen the bodies! Mouths gaping open. Oxygen masks still in their hands, but I think they died fighting for breath.

"I found these."

He tossed a plastic bag that rattled when the pilot caught it.

"Don't ask where they got them." He shivered. "Bait, I imagine, to tempt them out of their wits."

The bag held half a kilo of diamonds. Perfect white octahedral crystals weighing up to a dozen carats, they glittered like a shattered rainbow when he let us see them. The pilot goggled at them and battered him with questions.

"I never touched the white stuff," he said. "I don't know what it is. I don't want to. I did look for records, a logbook, anything. Not a clue. I think all they thought about was how to get away alive. My own luck was better, but I don't want to stretch it."

"We have to land," Bates told me. "If we don't, your uncle would only send us back."

The diamonds had captured Elena.

"So many!" She stirred a handful of the great gems with a finely tapered forefinger, her own eyes shining. "So big! So perfect. All almost identical. I've got to know how they came to be."

She wanted to see that strange white stuff for herself. The copilot was still fighting his funk. Bates was cautious, but he set us down on the western shore of a narrow mountain peninsula that ran south across the equator from the largest continent. She ran tests and pronounced the nitrogen harmless, so long as we didn't try to breathe it.

With oxypacks and breathing masks, we cycled out of the air lock. A breeze off the sea felt warm enough for T-shirts, but the white sand beach sloped up to what looked like banks of snow. Dark cliffs stood beyond them, cut with a sheer-walled canyon that came down from a mountain ridge. The cliffs were topped with something white.

We had come prepared for work outside, with nuclear power for the oxygen generators. To sow the algae, we had brought four light rocket-driven drones. The pilots went to work at once, assembling them. I climbed down to a tidal pool for a sample of the native sea water when Elena wanted to test the spores in it and tramped with her up the beach for a closer look at the white stuff.

"Frost!" She knelt with a pocket lens to study films of it on the rocks. The mask muffled her voice. "But growing like something alive."

Under the sun, it did glitter like frost.

"Hexagonal crystals," she said. "Like snowflakes, but—" She leaned closer. "Each one has a bright point at the center. Something that glints like a tiny diamond."

Higher up the beach it had grown thicker, finally into something like crystal fur, ankle deep. Fascinated with it, she was still disappointed.

"I had a glimpse of something taller, farther inland, as we came down. I'd like to see it."

"I don't want you to kill yourself."

"Not with all these riddles around us!" Dark eyes shining, she shrugged danger away. "I could work here forever."

In the months we stayed to watch the spores at work, I came to love her. Back on Earth, I'd begun a very modest academic career, planning a historical monograph on my uncle's interstellar enterprises. No woman had ever held me long, but her fascination with the exotic mysteries of the planet gave Elena herself a bit of its hazardous allure. Perhaps I gave her an escape from too much strangeness. She began to share her cabin with me.

The copilot was jealous; he had dated her before we left Earth. To fend him off, she announced that we were engaged. We made a little ceremony of it. The pilot had brought wine. I had no ring. Instead, I gave her a keepsake coin. A farewell gift from my father before he went away, it was a worn silver dollar minted in ancient America. He told me to carry it for luck, though it had brought no luck to him.

Cheerfully enough, the copilot lifted his glass to us and the future of New Earth.

That did look bright. Testing sea water, Elena found free oxygen. She planted seed in a patch of dry silt by the stream, had us dig an irrigation ditch, took holos for my uncle as they sprouted and grew. She served us a feast of ripe red tomatoes and golden cantaloupe and fresh green corn, and begged the pilots to move our ship farther inland.

The copilot hunched to something like a shudder. "If you'd seen those mummies in the survey craft—"

"Let's leave that till later," the pilot urged her, more tactfully. "A skipship's not a taxi. We need a level spot like this beach for any safe landing, not any sort of forest. We should have an oxygen atmosphere by the time we get back, and vehicles for surface exploration."

She wanted to study the planet in its native state, before the liberated oxygen could change it. If we couldn't move the ship, she was going inland on foot.

"Up those cliffs?" The pilot shook his head. "With your gear to carry? I wouldn't try."

"Give me a chance," she urged him. "I had a glimpse as we came down. Something—" We were off the ship, standing in our camp on the beach. She stopped to shake her head at the banks of snow white crystals above us. "I can't imagine what, but it's not too far. The oxypack should last to get me up there and back again, with time enough to spare."

She had told me she was pregnant. I begged her to think of the child, but the challenge of the planet meant more to her than anything. She showed the pilot a letter of authority from my uncle. He agreed to wait for her, with a warning that he could mount no rescue effort if she ran into trouble.

She thanked him, hugged me, and tramped away across the silicon frost, stumbling sometimes under the weight of the oxypack on her back. We watched till she was finally gone beyond a bend in the canyon wall. After a sleepless night, I told the pilot I wanted to follow.

"Forget it." He set his gray-stubbled jaw, scowling at me. "Your responsibility is to your uncle. And, if you'll excuse me, she's more fit than you are. She knows the hazards. The best we can do is hope she gets back on her own."

She didn't. We waited till her oxypack was surely dead. The pilot said we had to go. Whatever the copilot had felt for her, he seemed happy enough at the final feast he made us out of her garden. The pilot poured what was left of the wine.

"Don't blame yourself." He tried to ease my self-reproach. "We all tried to warn her."

We went home to Earth.

None of my friends or other relatives had been immortal, and Atlantica had become a strange and lonely place for me. My uncle had grown his hair longer, changed to a lilac cologne, found a stranger tailor. Yet he was always the imperious eternal. His smooth moon face still flushed red at any opposition or delay, but the diamonds had him oozing charm.

"They'll double my worth," he exulted. "And make you immortal."

I was to stay on Earth as head of the new corporation set up to exploit the planet. The pilot was to command the expedition and become the governor. He launched the project with a lavish banquet for his dazzled investors. There were toasts to him, to the pilot, to me. In the glow of the wine, I did feel almost immortal.

Next day, a little hung over, I found my way through new streets back to the Skipper's Club. The old building looked shabbier and smaller than ever, dwarfed now by a forest of towers around it. I paid the rent due and opened Elena's cold crypt box.

Inside, I found a little green jade Buddha, holo shots of her home and her parents and her kid sister, a hand-written diary with entries about her school friends and a young hyperspace engineer who had taken her out to Neptune Station on the first trial flight of a new skipship and broken her heart when he left on an eighty-year cruise. One of the holos, made at the dig, showed her squinting happily into the Indian sun, holding the little jade figure up to the camera.

"A wonderful omen!" she had captioned it. "Of enlightenment to come!"

I read the words through a blur of tears, still dreaming of things I had failed to do that might have saved her. When my mind had cleared, along with my vision, I renewed the lease on my own box and left her diary and the Buddha in it. Next day I told my uncle to keep the desk job. I was returning to New Earth.

His baby face flushed crimson, he raved at me for half an hour. What sort of idiot would give up eternal life for a woman dead a hundred years ago? All I knew was that I had to go. In the end he controlled his wrath and agreed to make me his personal agent on the new expedition.

"The diamonds are your first priority. Locate the source. Determine its extent. Secure it from any hazards, on or off the planet." His charm came on. "Do that, my boy, and you may still live forever."

His organization was already busy. A passenger vessel could carry a hundred pioneer families. A huge freighter would remain in orbit, ferrying supplies and equipment down to support the colony. He had arranged for a military escort, prepared for space or surface operations.

Again we studied New Earth from space. The science team found the algae at work, free oxygen everywhere. Green life had tinted some of the tropic coasts, though most of the land was still white with that anomalous silicon stuff.

If my uncle wanted diamonds, where were we to find them?

The dead men on the survey lander had left us no clue. We did know, however, that their planned landing site had been on that equatorial peninsula, where the planet's rotation would help lift them back into orbit. Its backbone was a rugged mountain chain, covered with what looked like a dense jungle of the silicon crystals. East of the mountains, the ground sloped down to a delta plain that was only lightly frosted.

The pilot set us down there, on level ground between two narrow rivers. The science team found the air breathable, though the oxygen content was still too low to support sustained exertion. Bulldozers came down to scrape the frost from building sites, and equipment to build oxygen generators.

For the diamond hunt, Bates brought down a heavy, wide-tracked armored crawler that looked able to go anywhere. The oxygen was too thin for combustion engines, and of course the planet had not grown anything to form coal or oil to fuel them. The crawler had nuclear power and oxygen boosters.

We struck west across the peninsula on a bright early morning, with a crew of five. I sat beside the driver on a high seat shielded with armor glass. The steam turbine ran silently, the caterpillar tracks crunching the silicon growth. The cool west wind that blew had a dry dust-scent when I slipped my mask aside. The silicon stuff grew thicker and taller as we climbed. Crystal feathers and fans and spikes had grown ankle-high, knee-high, waist-high, finally into a fragile jungle, blindingly white under the sun. The driver stopped to find dark glasses for us, and stopped again to change them for heavy goggles.

The level plain gave way to hills that slowed us. Shattering into dust under the tracks, the crystal tangle was no problem in itself, but it hid the ground. We lurched and jolted over rocks we hadn't seen, pitched and wallowed though hidden ravines. My stomach knotted from the motion.

We made only forty miles on that first day. Nightfall stopped us. The planet was moonless, the sky utterly black, yet the silicon shone with a faint and ghostly phosphorescence. The wind had stopped. Nothing around us moved or made a sound. We had found no diamonds, no trace of the surveyor landing, nor anything we understood. The men were tired and jittery. The engineer climbed up into the cockpit to try the strange air and come down again shaking his head.

"I don't like it. Too damn dark. Too damn dead."

Hard liquor had been forbidden, but he rummaged in the science locker and filled a beaker with something that had more fire than flavor. We passed it and finished our ration packs. The men crawled into their narrow berths. I went back to the cockpit and called Bates to report.

We had hardly spoken when something cut off his voice. I shouted into the microphone, but all I got was a quavery hum that rose and fell and died finally into silence. I was shouting again when I heard a sharp and anxious voice.

Father! Come to me!

It sent a chill down my spine. A child's high voice, it seemed utterly strange, yet somehow hauntingly familiar. In a moment, when it came again, I thought it seemed like Elena's, the voice she might have had when she was three. It seemed desperately urgent, desperately distressed.

Father, you must!

My mind blanked out till I heard that hum again. Almost musical, faint at first, it rose and fell and ceased. I sat there in the dead silence, staring around me at the faint white glow of the dead black hills under the dead black sky, till I heard Bates again.

"Did you hear it?" He startled me. "What the hell was it?"

"I don't know." My voice was a whisper. "I wish I did."

"Who could be here, light-years from anywhere?"

I hung up, with no more to say. He had heard the voice; it had to be more than imagination. But I had no child. I'd had no love affair except with Elena, and that two hundred years ago. I sat there half the night in the dead stillness and the eerie glow of the silicon, groping for answers I never found.

Next morning our spirits rose with the sun and fell again when we came to a long escarpment that held us up. We turned to blunder through the crystal jungle along its foot until we reached a break where we could climb it. At the top we came out on a flat plateau covered with an actual silicon forest.

Straight white stalks towered out of a dense white crystal undergrowth. They had no leaves or branches, but each stalk was topped with something like a huge bloom. The petals were daisy-like, mirror-bright, tipped and cupped to focus sunlight on a black mass at the center.

I had the driver stop to let me make holos for my uncle, and let him push ahead. The stalks were far taller than our crawler, but slender and fragile. They shattered like glass. Fragments rained around us. The driver stretched his hand to catch one that fell into the cockpit, and stopped to blink at it. A perfect white octagonal carbon crystal the size of a walnut.

"Diamonds!" he yelled at the men below. "Diamonds! Grown on trees!"

They scrambled back along our trail, digging great gems out of the shattered trash. Twice the driver pulled ahead to crush through another strip. That night I called Bates again to report that we had gathered a hundred kilograms of perfect carbon crystals. He was elated, but anxious when he remembered the dead surveyors.

"That's enough," he told me. "Get on back before something—"

Again he was cut off. Again that musical tone rose and faded.

Father, do you hear me? Elena's urgent child-voice came again. *Come on to me. I'll show you the way.*

The hum came back, lifted, ceased.

"Get back here!" Bates was yammering. "While you can."

Next morning I told the driver to take us back to the landing and called Bates to tell him we were on the way. The hum cut us off before he could answer.

You can't leave now, the child-voice cried. *You are almost here. Let me guide you on.*

I had the driver turn again and take us farther west, crashing through an ice-like forest that grew taller and denser as we went. Bits of broken silicon rained down around us. The driver caught another diamond. The engineer wanted to stop and gather more, but I kept the headphones on. The voice stayed with us, almost as if the child had been with us in the cockpit, guiding us around rocks and pits. I found the driver staring at me.

"The diamonds, sir? Don't you think we have enough?"

I shook my head and waved him on. It was late afternoon when the child made me stop the driver on a rocky shelf in the shadow of a cliff. I climbed down to the ground and stumbled over Elena's bones, bleached white as the silicon. Shreds of her clothing lay around her, with her mask and the oxypack. Among the bones of her fingers, I found the old silver dollar.

She had come a long way from the western beach. Lost, I suppose, and wandering blindly through the crystal tangle. Her compass had been useless; the planet had no magnetic field. I took the darkly tarnished coin and climbed back into the crawler. The voice had ceased. I told the driver to take us back to the landing.

"Thank you, sir!" Relief had warmed his haggard, unshaven features. "I hope you're okay now."

We went back down our trail. Here and there we caught the glint of a fallen diamond lying in the dust. The engineer wanted to gather more, but the uneasy drivers voted to hurry on. We were near the escarpment before darkness stopped us.

Sleeping that night with the old dollar clutched in my hand, I dreamed of Elena. Alive and lovely again, she was happy to see me. We were back on the clean white beach, breathing sweet air with no need of oxygen gear. The surf was murmurous music. We made love. Again she was wonderful.

But suddenly we were back where I had found her bones, standing beside the crawler in the ghostly phosphoresce of the forest. Still nude, she had great diamonds tangled in her long black hair. I reached to embrace her, but she pushed me away. I saw her own bones at her feet.

"You must go." Her eyes were dark with tragic sadness. "Get off the planet. You and all your people."

"They won't," I told her. "They're diamond-mad."

"You have no choice." She gestured at her skull. "You are killing us. We must protect ourselves."

"Elena," I whispered, "can you explain—"

Before I could finish, she had dissolved into the faint white glow of the forest around us. I woke inside the crawler, chilled with sweat and trembling, the oxygen generator whispering faintly above me and the engineer snoring in the berth beneath. Lying there till dawn, I wrestled for some sort of sanity.

What had she been?

Who was the child?

Or was it all hallucination?

No answer offered much comfort. I knew nothing of the silicon life, if the stuff was in any sense alive, but the tall stalks were shaped like exotic plants. Now I had to wonder if Elena had met some kind of silicon mind before she died. Had the child in her womb become some kind of bridge to it? I found no way to know.

Dawn came. We found our trail down the escarpment and followed it through the forest and the frost, back to the site. Most of the settlers were still aboard the passenger ship, out in orbit, but scores of workers were already busy at the landing. Bates gathered the leaders into a temporary hall. Displaying the diamonds and our holos of the diamond forest, he got a roar of applause and asked me to speak.

Standing there before the eager workers, thinking of Elena's skeleton and my dreams of her, if dreams were all they had been, I was groping uncertainly for what to say until suddenly I heard the child speaking with my own voice.

"The diamonds are there," it said. "But they are not for us. We must leave the planet and forget them."

The applause fell to silence and became a roar of anger. The child was gone. Left there without comprehension or direction, I stumbled though the story of our drive, the crystal trees, Elena's bones, the warning from the child.

"It's only a dream," I had to admit. "But I do believe the crystals have some kind of sentience. It sees us as a threat, and it doesn't want us here."

Bates took the lectern to preside over a furious debate. The diamonds were real. The supply was endless. Only idiots or cowards would give them up for any crazy dream. Yet perhaps there was actual danger, he agreed. Out of respect for my uncle and his investors, we should be prudent.

After all, the terraforming process was far from complete. He asked for a show of hands by those who might want to fly to Earth and back while the algae released oxygen enough to make the planet habitable.

No hands rose.

"We came for diamonds," the engineer spoke for the crowd. "I say damn the danger."

A pilot from the freighter took me back to Earth in a little escape craft, with my uncle's share of the diamonds. Elated with them, he floated a new company given title and a charter to occupy the second continent on New Earth. Free land, a fine climate, rich soil, trees that grew diamonds! He wanted me to go as his high commissioner.

Remembering Elena and the child's voice, I hesitated.

"You and your idiot father!" He shook his head in astonished pity for me. "Nothing to it. Just get your fleetload of suckers into orbit. Drop down to the planet for a quick look around. Collect data for the sales staff. Pick up the diamonds due me. And you'll come back eternal!"

I left Elena's dollar with her green jade Buddha in my cold box at the Skipper's Club and went back to New Earth one last time, with almost a dozen vessels in our flotilla. Calling from low orbit, we got no response. The passenger craft and the freighter were still in orbit, but lifeless as the survey lander. We did not approach them.

Dropping to scan the peninsula, we found bright white frost grown back over the landing strip and the lonely little huddle of buildings beside it, unmarked by anything. No trace was left of our track though the crystal jungle. The injured planet had healed itself.

The spectrometers showed no free oxygen left in the atmosphere, and only traces of carbon dioxide. That had been replaced with cyanogen, the molecule of nitrogen and carbon that forms deadly 'prussic acid. Nobody who breathed it would leave the planet alive.

We came back home.

"So things go." Unperturbed, my uncle shrugged the failure off. He had bought another planet. "A cosmic anomaly, they call it. Earth-like, but tossed out of its mother system by some odd freak of orbital mechanics. It's twenty light-years from its mother star. Sunless, frozen, dead a billion years. The holos look a little dismal, but I got it for nothing. A great chance for you. Terraform it for successful development, and you can still earn your own immortality." ○

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FREAKISH CONFIRMATION

At the age of fifty-five
I receive substantive evidence
for what I have known
since I have known
anything at all.

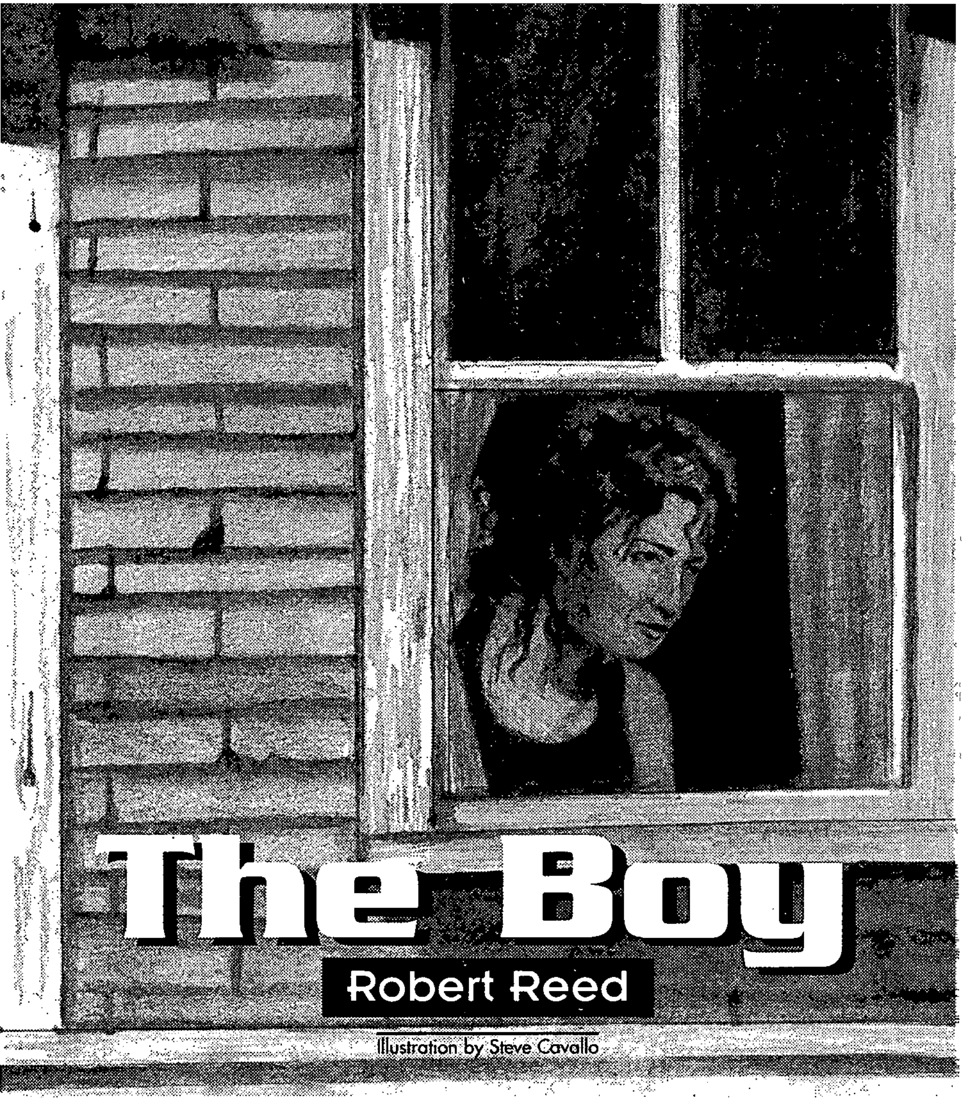
After X-raying my spine
my chiropractor blinks,
and blinks again.
"You have two extra ribs!"
she tells me. "And one
extra sacral vertebra!"

I am a freak of nature.
A mutant under the skin.
A skeletal overachiever.
That one in a million
and a half kind of guy.

Back on the street
I open my chest,
remove two long bones,
toss them into the clouds.
"Make me a couple women?"
I say. "Eve-like and tempting?"

The extra vertebra
I decide to keep for a while.
At least until I figure out
just how sacral it is.

—Bruce Boston



The Boy

Robert Reed

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

The mass market paperback edition of the Robert Reed's latest novel, *Marrow,* is just out from Tor Books. Mr. Reed tells us the inspiration for the following story came from two sources. "At a flea market, my wife bought one of those Christ-with-the-flock-of-sheep prints. She claims that she only wanted the frame, but somehow the Savior remains in his home. Nicely combed and very long hair; almost feminine, in some ways." He also had a tall adolescent boy come to the front door and ask if he could pick one of his flowers. Those two incidents got the author thinking about a simple what-if.

Dies Veneris.

A throbbing finds Helena.

It is warm and insistent, and in a small hard way, it feels angry.

For a slippery instant, the sensation is her own. Her heart is thundering, or maybe a sick artery is pulsing deep within her brain. Then she finds herself awake, realizing that a lazy after-lunch nap must have ambushed her, and as she sits up in bed, breathing in quick sighs, the throbbing turns from something felt into a genuine sound, and the sound swells until the loose panes in her windows begin to rattle, and the air itself reverberates like the stubborn head of a beaten drum.

A car passes. Smallish, and elderly. Nothing about it fast or particularly dangerous. But it is endowed with oversized speakers, their unlovely, thoroughly modern music making the neighborhood shiver.

Helena watches the car as far as her lilacs.

Then it vanishes, and the rude noise diminishes, and she lies back on her pillow, considering. Considering how much time she has, and her mood. Twenty minutes left in her lunch hour. A six-minute drive to work, if traffic cooperates. Her right hand tugs casually at her zipper. An after-lunch indulgence, she's thinking. She thinks about one man, then another. But the music returns, and her window glass rattles until it stops in mid-throb—a cessation of sound that startles in its own right.

Helena takes a breath, and holds it.

Through the windows, a person appears. A male person. On foot, strolling with purpose along her narrow driveway.

Helena feels embarrassed for no good reason. She sits up, telling herself that nobody can see her. And even if they could, she was doing nothing but enjoying a dieter's lunch and an innocent nap.

Her doorbell rings.

Helena gives her zipper a tug before slipping into her front room.

She's not sure what to do. Nothing is a viable, sensible option. Stand and wait and do nothing. Because caution is always sensible, she reminds herself. Just last week, another local woman was raped, and they still haven't found the monster responsible. But then the doorbell rings again, gnawing away her resolve. Cathedral bells, it's supposed to sound like. But it's a cheap wireless bell that she installed herself, and the batteries are dying, and a bright sharp hum lingers. She can still hear the hum as she unbolts and opens the front door. Standing on her tiny concrete porch is a tall thin boy. He looks to be sixteen, with few pimples and a neat diamond-shaped scar standing on his right cheek. She doesn't know his face. Or does she? Placing a hand on the locked latch of her storm door, Helena begins with a soft cough, then growls, "Yes?"

The boy seems to be staring at the rain gutter, eyes held in a half-squint and his narrow body held erect with his hands empty at his sides and his young, surprisingly deep voice saying to someone, "You're going to think this is retarded." Apparently speaking to her, he asks, "Can I pick one of your flowers?"

She thinks nothing at all. Except for a sudden relief that he isn't a rapist ready to crash through the glass. Why did she open her door to a stranger? How much good sense does that show? Even if it's daylight, in a good neighborhood. . . !

"Ma'am?" he prompts.

She says, "I guess. Of course."

Then she smiles, her expression going to waste.

The boy says, "Thank you, ma'am," without ever looking at her face. He seems embarrassed, turning and stepping off the porch, following the narrow walk to the driveway and the driveway out to where his ugly little car waits.

Helena closes her door and bolts it.

By the time she looks outside, the boy is carrying a single red tulip by the stalk. Her tulips are past their prime. One good shake, and that blossom flies apart. But no, he seems to be careful. Considerate. Climbing behind the wheel, the boy gently sets the flower on the seat beside him, then starts the little engine with a coarse rattle that brings back the music. Unchanged. Deep, and rhythmic. A male singer chants about some burning issue or love, but she can't quite make out the words, standing at her window, watching as the boy pulls into her driveway in order to back out again, turning back the way he started, again vanishing somewhere past the soft pink lilacs.

Helena can't help but wonder who's getting her flower.

Her big sedan is parked beside her very little house. East is the quick route. But today, Helena steers west. For a moment or two, she considers all the good sensible reasons to be curious about a stranger passing through her neighborhood. But she's not actually following the boy, she promises herself. Slowing at the corner, she looks ahead and then right, seeing the little car parked on the street, and silent. Nobody sitting inside it now.

The boy stopped in front of Lydia's house.

Unsure what she's thinking, Helena turns right and slows, staring at the brick bungalow with its little porch and little windows, its blinds and drapes pulled shut. She catches herself nearly stopping in the middle of the street. Then she accelerates, but only a little bit. And always staring.

Lydia's car is nowhere to be seen.

But her daughter's sporty little red car is in the driveway. For some reason, Sarah is home from school today. That bright and pretty girl whom Helena has always liked, and been friendly with, and occasionally felt motherly toward. And the blinds have been pulled shut. And Helena still isn't sure what she is thinking. Except that she has the burning premonition that someone here needs to be given a good sharp warning.

Dies Saturni.

Helena loves men.

And in all the good modern ways, she tries to understand and respect them.

Men are relatively common at work. Coaxed by the courts and changing times, state government has made heroic efforts to find room for qualified citizens of every ilk. Not that her male co-workers hold their share of the high posts. In most cases, departments are still ruled by gray-haired women with political minds and provincial morals. But some men have risen higher than Helena ever will, and she doesn't begrudge them their successes. Not at all. They are good smart and decent people, and each one deserves every opportunity that he has earned, or that he has been given. No person journeys through life today without holding such a charitable view toward the other half of her species. Helena believes. And she says what she believes whenever the occasion demands it.

When she's with her male work-friends, it seems as if they can chat about anything, without taboos. Office gossip. Politics. Crude jokes, and insulting the old religions. If handled with care, even romance and sex are viable topics. Helena likes to believe that the men are pals and confidants, and that they genuinely trust her. She definitely wants to feel worthy of their trust. But as with everything, there are limits. Her closest friends are always women. Single, like her. Or dykes. Most with children, while a few are involved in some kind of marriage. Sitting in the breakroom with her girlfriends, or sharing a pitcher of beer after work, she hears herself speaking out of a different part of her mind. With women, she's more likely to use questionable language. To speak frankly about sex. And on occasion mention God and Christ without the modern scorn. Likewise men in the company of other men have their own mores. More than once, Helena has eavesdropped on their conversations. They can be the most modern, civilized creatures. Wealthy in their own right, and educated, and loyal to their nation and their assorted families. Yet despite all that, they forever carry a useful fatalism and a deep and abiding fear. Centuries of slow reform have built this world, and its considerable freedoms. But in their harsh jokes, they expose their real hearts. Everything they have won can vanish again. Suddenly, without the pretense of fairness. Each time they mutter "Bitches," their ancient fierceness betrays itself. Even when their curses are dressed up in smiles and laughter. One of them whispers, "Stupid cunt," and that's all it takes for them to laugh together, happy beyond words, and the woman listening at the breakroom door has no choice but to grimace, and shiver.

Yet this isn't the old world; the new freedoms lift everyone higher.

In this enormously prosperous society, a single woman has her own rich opportunities, and risks, and the responsibilities that come with these blessings. Helena has owned her little house for twelve years. With the bank's help and approval, of course. She does all of the vacuuming and dusting. Whenever the urge and energy strike, she redecorates one of her little rooms, and she does as she pleases with her grass and gardens. No sisters or fellow disciples offer their poor advice, or goodhearted criticism, or forbid what you so much want to do. Like that weekend morning when Helena decided to paint her trim and her little garage. It was her impulse. She was the one who drove to the paint store. She selected the bright shade of blue and the ordinary white. Then she saved herself a small fortune by doing the work herself.

Mostly.

Lydia had just moved into the neighborhood. She brought her daughter and an older son, plus their father. Callan, the father, was a part-time presence. Home some nights. Other nights, absent. He worked construction jobs and as a bartender and sometimes a handyman for hire. He was a smiling, handsome fellow. A little short, but not too short. Boyish in the face, but old around his dark eyes. The consequence of being a smoker and a determined drunk, no doubt.

Lydia's property sits perpendicular to Helena's backyard. It was a Saturday afternoon, sunny and warm, and Helena was busily painting the backside of her garage. Callan was standing behind the fence, making small talk while watching her backside. In the most offhand fashion, she admitted that she didn't like climbing too high on her ladder, which was why she hadn't finished the trim just beneath the peak of her house. No, Helena wasn't begging for favors. She took pride in doing her own fix-it jobs. But Callan took the confession as a plea, and laughing in that fearless way that only men can, he told her, "I'll do the ugly for you. How about that?"

She heard herself say, "If you don't mind. I guess."

But he turned away and started for Lydia's back door. "If I'm going to do this chore," he explained, "I'll need a good shot of vodka first."

He was a talkative, usually pleasant drunk.

After the painting was done, Helena invited him inside her house. No vodka, she warned. But she had beer. And Callan happily drank her beer, regaling her with stories about his adventurous little life. He had done his stint in the Service, he boasted. Australia, then the Middle East. "Eleven kids on three continents," was his favorite boast. Which was an astonishing, almost baffling number. How could so many women allow themselves to get pregnant with his seed? Callan's charms were simple and probably didn't reach very deep. By his own estimate, he wasn't particularly bright or creative. Really, his only substantial claim was that he was an exceptional lover. "Enough cock for two men," he promised, sitting on her sofa with the spent beer cans crushed at this feet and his knees apart and his pants hiked up high and tight.

Helena decided to call his bluff, asking, "Is there enough cock for two women?"

He blinked, flashing a boyish grin as he sang out, "Always, darling. Forever!"

This was eight years ago.

They slipped into her bedroom, and plopping down on the bed, Helena instructed him to undress as she watched. Callan seemed perfectly happy. But once he was naked, stroking himself to prove his boast, he happened to glance above her tall dresser. A picture hung there. Helena had bought the picture at a garage sale. For its frame, she explained. Wider than it was tall, with an arching and halfway ornate backbone, the frame was made of some cheap metal meant to resemble brass, embossed with a vine and flowers that might or might not be honeysuckles. She had kept the picture inside because she hadn't found any other that quite fit the frame, she told him. Though in some ways, she rather liked that image. There was something comforting about seeing Christ sitting among the flock.

Men can be extraordinarily superstitious.

Callan, particularly. He immediately dropped his prick. His erection began to fade, the scared blood in full retreat, and with a suddenly soft voice, he announced, "It bothers me. Would you get it out of here?"

Helena had to laugh, but to mollify the man, she covered the offending image with her paint-spattered shirt. Yet Callan remained ill-at-ease. It took another twenty minutes to get him back into shape again, and then, he wasn't particularly fun. Tentative. Self-conscious. Far from the horny maverick that he'd promised in the first place.

Lydia knew about the two of them.

But Helena and her neighbor remained friendly, if not friends, and it was a subject neither woman brought up. Nor did it need to be. Men were free to sleep with whomever wanted them. Besides, she and Callan screwed just a few times, in all. It wasn't as if Helena intended to bear Callan's twelfth child. Frankly, she had better taste than poor Lydia. When and if the time came, there were legions of potential fathers better qualified than that charming and superstitious little drunk.

Then five years ago, Callan seemed to vanish.

At first, it didn't seem remarkable. But several weeks became several months, and his dented old truck still wasn't parked against the curb. The sun and rain began to fade the oil spot on the pavement, which was very strange. And that's why one day, standing at the back fence, Helena asked about him.

Lydia is a handsome, raspy-voiced woman. She responded by staring off into the distance, then with her voice soft and certain, she said, "Really, I don't believe that's even slightly your business."

Which was probably true.

A week or two later, on a pleasantly warm Saturday afternoon, Helena was kneeling in her front yard, weeding. And suddenly Callan's old truck appeared, chugging past her house and pulling up onto Lydia's yard, the drunken man staggering out of it and up the porch steps, holding a whiskey bottle by its neck as he shoved his way into the house. Lydia's windows were open; Helena couldn't help but hear the shouting. And where the curtains were open, she could see the combatants moving. Or standing perfectly still. In some strange fashion, it was a pleasure to watch their fight. Helena's little life seemed suddenly peaceful and perfect; not having children or permanent men were blessings, plainly. Callan screamed incoherently. Lydia cursed him horribly. Little Sarah was begging them to get along. Please! Then her older brother warned someone to shut up. And that was followed by the hard quick *pop,* and a terrible silence instantly settled over that sad little house.

Moments later, Lydia staggered from the back door, one hand pressed against her bloodied face. Helena was standing in her own backyard by then. Lydia seemed to glance her way, her expression shifting and unreadable. Then on rubbery legs, she walked to the next house on her street, and a few minutes later, the police and medics descended, burly officers restraining the drunken man by his arms and ankles, and Lydia climbing out of the ambulance long enough to shout, "You fucking dick-faced asshole!"

Callan had always boasted to Helena about his innate luck. "That's why women want kids from me," he loved to explain. "They want what I have. How everything always comes out right for me in the end."

Helena took a day of vacation to attend the trial. And for a little while, it seemed as if the famous Callan luck would hold. Callan's son took the stand. A burly teenager with his father's good looks and easy charm, he changed his story, trying to convince the jury that his mother had injured herself by falling. He certainly told a convincing lie. But then Lydia put her hand on the Bible and pointed straight at Callan, telling the eight women and four men on the jury, "He hit me. Here." She pointed at her swollen, broken cheekbone. "Here," she repeated. "He's the one responsible."

Neither lawyer asked for the daughter's testimony. Perhaps because she was so young and so obviously distraught by this tragedy.

Nor did anyone call on Helena. And she didn't offer her opinions, either. She didn't want to appear to be a busybody or a fool, telling what she might have seen, or what she thought she had heard, all while looking through windows some fifty feet away.

Callan's sole defense was that he couldn't remember anything. He had drunk that much, and the horrible day was lost to him, and for everything that he might have done, he was sorry sorry sorry.

The jury deliberated for a heartbeat, it seemed.

They decided that Callan would live in custody for thirty years, working every day inside one of the sprawling factories where men indistinguishable from him could make restitution for their significant, nearly unforgivable crimes.

Which was how it should be.

But for weeks, Helena couldn't sleep through an entire night. Odd dreams would awaken her, and persistent fears kept her awake, eyes staring up through the suffocating darkness, her mind darting. No, Callan wasn't a good man. What could be more obvious than that? And she herself hadn't seen or heard anything conclusive. If anyone had let her take the stand—a huge assumption, that—then she would have offered nothing but a vague impression. As she watched the fight, and listened, it seemed to her that it was Callan who was standing in front of the kitchen window, both hands on the countertop to keep his drunken self upright. And when his son screamed, he said, "Shut up, you bitch!" And the sharp sudden *pop* came while Callan was still holding tight to the countertop, fighting to keep the pitching of the earth from throwing him down.

But even if that was true—even if the son had struck Lydia—how could Helena have helped anyone by talking? If a mother wants to protect her first-born, then what good would words from nosy neighbor accomplish?

No, she kept telling herself, she'd done what was best.

Or at least, what was the least awful.

But she couldn't stop thinking of Callan. Feeling sorry for that drunken man-child. She would remember him naked in her bedroom, happily playing with himself . . . and she invented an odd and complex fantasy where the picture on the wall hadn't spoiled the first moment, and their affair grew into something larger and more permanent. She discovers what is good about him, then she cultures it. And slowly, with patience, she makes Callan into a man worthy of a woman's trust and love.

The sun would eventually rise, illuminating the opposite wall, and the picture.

One morning, tired enough to cry, Helena rose from her bed and pulled the picture from its hook, intending to put it away. But as so often happens when you take down an old picture, she looked at it carefully for the first time in years. Christ sitting in a pasture, she saw. The delicate, lovely face looking more European than Middle Eastern. That long silky hair and the deep, eternal eyes. And those tiny hands gently cradling the face of a newborn lamb.

What was the Daughter of God saying to the animal? she asked herself.

What great and ancient wisdom of peace and charity and love was being wasted on that stupid, stupid beast?

Dies Solis.

Helena hasn't attended church in twenty years. But sometimes she feels a strange envy when her oldest neighbors—women and the occasional shriveled up man—drive slowly past in the early morning, dressed in their best clothes, having somewhere important to be. Even though she isn't a believer anymore, the old tugs remain. The faith of a childhood can't be purged. Ever. And there is a piece of her that can't even grieve that fact. Even now, she can still worry about her immortal soul.

Instead of church and prayer, Helena spends her mornings pushing her lawn mower. The machine is cheap and loud, and it smokes, and it's old enough that it lacks any modern safety features. Which makes the chore into a little adventure. One misstep, and she can lose a big toe or maybe half of her foot. Images of carnage help her concentrate, and afterward, she can feel as if she has accomplished something large.

This is late morning, and she is struggling with the corners of her backyard. Two elderly women approach without being noticed. Their first shouts go unheard. But then Helena senses motion, and she turns, startled to see them. The mower dies with a last puff of oily smoke. She just stares at the round faces and the long white hair. Then to her mother, she asks, "What's wrong?" because something definitely is. She asks both of them, "What are you doing in town?"

Mother says, "Shopping, eventually. And to see you, dear."

Both women are dressed for church. But their wide leather belts have been loosened and dress shoes have been replaced with comfortable gray sneakers.

Aunt Ester explains, "We started out after early service."

Ester never misses church.

"You should have called first," says Helena. "I could have had brunch waiting. And I wouldn't be such a mess."

"You look good and honest," says Ester.

Mother says, "Honey."

That single word alerts Helena. She looks at her mother's sober expression, and again she asks, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Both women say it.

Then Mother adds, "We just wanted to tell you in person." And she pauses for a dangerous moment, gathering herself before saying, "We've sold the farm. We got an offer . . . a very generous one . . . and it's time, we decided. . . ."

Helena wipes her forehead with her driest hand. "Who? Who gets it?"

"One of the local corporations," says Ester. She's a large woman—one of the largest that Helena has ever known—and not just because of her dimensions. Ester is a creature of substantial beliefs and strengths. Doubt is foreign to her. A weakness, and good reason for disgust. Hinting at some old debate, she looks at Mother and shakes her head once, for emphasis. Then she admits, "We're old women. Not enough of our kids want to be farmers. And the corporations are the only ones who can make us comfortable in our retirement."

"The house, too?" Helena squeaks.

"Oh, we keep that," Mother interjects. "That and the surrounding ground. For as long as we want to live there."

We are seven women, in all. Mother and Ester and another sister, plus four unrelated women. They became Disciples of Christ together in a bonding ceremony some forty-five years ago. Their sprawling farm was a gift from their various mothers. And it was an amazing success for Mother and Ester, since their mother's old farm was the smallest and poorest portion of the dowry.

"We could have left it to you and the others," says Ester. "But with these new rules . . . well, it makes it impossible to keep things together. . . ."

Taxes, she means. And the fair inheritance laws.

Helena starts to say, "I understand."

But Mother interrupts, telling her, "Nothing changes until next year. Officially."

Helena nods.

Trying to look anywhere else, her eyes wander. Past the steel chain and post fence is a tiny square of grass. Lydia's backyard. Lying on a faded green blanket, basking in the late spring sun, is the daughter. Is Sarah. She wears nothing but a tiny swimsuit and a pale, springtime tan that by summer will have turned to a brown gold. She's a pretty black-haired girl with her mother's wide hips and prominent bustline. Eyes shut, ears embraced by headphones, she seems immune to the world around her. A self-involved woman-child, Helena thinks. Probably fantasizing about her tulip-toting boyfriend . . . and now Helena blinks and turns away, shaking her head for every good reason.

"What's this flower?" asks Mother.

"Fritillaria," Helena says.

"It's beautiful," she says. "Don't you think so, Ester?"

A luxurious emerald stalk and thick leaves have risen out of the perennial bed, sprouting large crimson flowers that are pointed downward. To Helena, the plant resembles one of those ornate antique lamps from the days of the Great Queens and their farflung Empires. Quietly, she says, "Smell it. But carefully."

Her aunt keels. Sniffs. Says, "Ugh."

"It's a difficult odor," Helena concedes.

Mother risks her own little sniff, then says, "I don't mind it." Straightening, she tries to show a big smile, saying, "Maybe we could grow them in our garden. Where do you find it, darling?"

Helena tries to reply.

But Ester interrupts, announcing, "I don't think we need such a thing."

She says, "It reeks like a skunk."

Mother says nothing, and everything shows on her face. The color has drained out of her. Her features instantly turn to cold wax, and the eyes seem to focus on a faraway point, and in the same instant, they turn blind.

Ester tries to laugh, saying, "Now, now. Don't pout."

Helena stares at the clipped grass, holding her breath.

"You know perfectly well," says the older sister. "Frances won't like its looks. And Eve is sensitive to *every* bad odor."

"I know," Mother whispers.

"Fritillaria is a big white bulb," Helena offers. "You plant it in the fall. The same depth you plant tulips."

"Cock depth," says Ester, repeating the bawdy old joke. Then with an artificial cheerfulness, she tells her sister, "We'll let you put one or two of these monsters up by the old barn. Eve never visits the barn anymore."

"I don't either," says Mother.

Ester conspicuously ignores her.

Mother takes a breath and turns and says to the garage, "Come down and see us sometime, darling." She says, "Soon," as if pleading. And before anyone can offer a word or make the tiniest sound, she marches for the gate, leaving the backyard as quickly as she can without actually bursting into a run.

Ester shrugs as she always does, laughing at her baby sister's peculiarities. Then she glances across the fence, asking, "Is that your little neighbor girl?"

Helena stares at her aunt.

Saying nothing.

Ester feels the stare, and calmly ignores it.

"She's grown into quite the pretty young thing," the old woman declares. The undisputed leader of her disciple, now and always, she glances at Helena, and winks once, then adds, "A girl like that . . . shit, I could plow an entire county with all the eager young cock she could lure in. Don't doubt it, darling!"

Dies Lunae.

Helena glances at her bedstand clock, measuring how long she has to fiddle with her always difficult hair. Only a few minutes, she realizes. So she does a hurry-up job before rushing out the door with the sack lunch that she fixed last night. Callan used to tease her about her punctual nature. He would spy her as he was heading out to his newest job, or as he was arriving home from an all-night drunk, or maybe he was just standing out in the yard, waiting for Helena. He would wave and laugh, and without a care in the world, he would shout the predictable words:

"I could set my watch by you, woman. You're that predictable!"

The simple memory gnaws. For no sensible reason, Helena finds herself debating her nature with an imaginary Callan, muttering to herself as she backs out of the garage and onto the street. Saint Judith Boulevard takes her straight to work. Honestly, there have been plenty of times when she arrived late. Because of weather, or traffic mishaps, or sometimes they'll hold a big rally down at the parenthood clinic. But not this morning, she notes. The clinic is at the corner of Judith and New Hope. A low brick building without windows, it is surrounded by a high iron fence and pivoting cameras. Just a dozen quiet protesters are patrolling the sidewalk this morning. A listless group, they hold hand-painted signs overhead. Two serious men for every earnest woman. Which is typical of these groups.

A bearded young man carries a red-lettered sign.

"Life Is Always Precious!" Helena reads as she drives past.

Then she isn't thinking about Callan anymore, or the protesters, either. Just like that, her conscious mind is swirling, ancient memories suddenly so fresh and raw that it's all she can do to keep her car on the road.

Sometimes the department head invites a few of her favorites out for drinks after work. Today's excuse is an excellent ranking by the Auditor's office. Helena doesn't want to be included, but she's beckoned and feels obliged to make an appearance. Have a beer, then slip away. That's her plan. But some sneaky soul refills her glass from the common pitcher, and what can she do? Sit and take part. Ignore her mood, and ignore the day's tensions. And whatever happens, she reminds herself that she needs to smile.

Her supervisor sits beside her, increasing her secret misery.

Morris is a tall, long-legged man, and a decorated veteran, who served as a lieutenant in the final Asian wars. People in a position to know claim that he was only a lowly supply officer, and that he was wounded only because of incredibly bad luck. Or good luck, depending on your perspective. Even today, scars on a man are supposed to have weight and a curious beauty. They prove bravery and suffering and devotion to higher causes. But on Morris, that raised chunk of flesh on his throat is nothing but ugly. It always draws the eye, making Helena notice that his neck is ridiculously long, and the rest of him is pale and soft, and in so many ways, homely.

At one point, when he's sure that the department head is paying attention, he says to Helena, "We've adopted another one. Did I tell you?"

He has. Several times.

But she knows to smile and ask, "Is that so?" with a feigned ignorance.

"From a little city-state," he continues. "Hue. On the southeast coast."

The department head—a corpulent, gray-haired woman at the end of the table—leans forward on her elbows, asking, "Now how many does it make, Mr. Morris?"

"Eight," he declares happily.

Maybe it's the beer, or maybe beer is her excuse. Either way, Helena prods him, saying, "I bet it's another girl."

"Naturally," he booms. Then with a self-congratulatory laugh, Morris flips open his wallet and passes around the newest family portrait. A glance is all that Helena needs. Eight girls of various ages, from various parts of Asia, stand among his own five children. His handsome and astonishingly energetic wife kneels down in front. They supposedly have a monogamous marriage. Very modern, and scrupulously fair. Morris never sleeps around. "I was a virgin when I was married," he will tell anyone who mistakenly brings up the subject. "And my wife is the only lover for me."

Everyone at the table has heard Morris describe his vital, heartfelt beliefs.

But the department head likes to watch his performances, and she prompts him by saying, "You're doing these young ladies such a service."

"We just wish we could save more," he replies. A predictable and pretentious man, he can't resist telling the world about his virtuous soul. He always uses the same words: "We" because his marriage is the perfect partnership. And "save" because everyone knows where these lovely little girls come from.

Amused looks are traded between the women.

He seems blind to their grins. With a heavy, overly dramatic voice, Morris warns, "There might come another war in China. Manchuria and the South are feuding again, and the Viets are trying to make new alliances."

Asian politics are complex and frequently horrific. Helena rarely bothers sorting out who's angry at whom, or which ones wield nuclear weapons, or which of these angry little states are going to be supported, for a day or two, by the Western Powers.

"Too many balls are in charge over there," Morris tells them.

Helena breaks into a cackling, half-drunken laugh.

The gray-haired woman gives her a look. "Now darling," she rumbles. "Wouldn't you want to help save a few of our little sisters?"

The beer makes Helena clumsy.

Makes her bold.

"I want to help," she claims. Except with her next breath, she points out, "These countries are nightmares. For our sisters, and the men, too. And sometimes I think, ma'am, that maybe our policies are a little bit to blame—"

"Nonsense," Morris interrupts. "Obviously, you've never lived in Asia."

"I guess I knew that," Helena replies.

Her co-workers laugh quietly. Women and the few men, both.

Morris licks his lips, then adds, "You certainly didn't give up five years of your life trying to put that continent to peace!"

She stares at his ugly face, and the scarred neck.

Then she surprises herself, remarking, "Everyone knows about you. You were inside your air-conditioned office, hiding between file cabinets, and a piece of shrapnel slipped through and nicked you, and you didn't let them stitch you up because you wanted to have a good pretty scar."

An astonished silence descends.

Morris' face is even paler than usual, his eyes round and cold, his expression moving from shock into utter embarrassment.

Helena feels ashamed, a little bit. She blinks and drops her gaze. The Morris family portrait has been passed around the table, ending up in front of her, and something in it catches her interest. She picks it up, ignoring the adopted daughters and the perfect wife and mother. And she disregards Morris' blood-daughters, too. Instead, her gaze focuses on the lanky teenage son standing in the back row, looking put upon by the camera, his face tilted and the diamond-shaped scar obvious on his cheek.

I know that face, she keeps thinking.

Then she remembers where she saw him, and the photograph slips from her hands, sliding into a ring of condensation.

Morris rescues his picture, wiping it dry against his sleeve, trying hard to kill Helena with hard looks and a pouting lower lip.

Dies Martis.

She fully intends to go to work today.

But when she's half-dressed, Helena has an abrupt change of heart. Standing in her bedroom with her little television playing, she isn't consciously listening to the news. But then the newscaster describes another rape not twenty blocks from her front door, and a cold suffocating dread takes her, and with an old woman's frailty, she suddenly collapses on the edge of her bed.

The morning weatherman appears. A roundish middle-aged fellow, he smiles warmly, looking utterly harmless for the camera. With a practiced jolliness, he describes approaching fronts and the promise of heavy rains. And somewhere in the midst of his forecast, Helena calls the office to say that she's under the weather and perhaps she'll recover by tomorrow.

For most of the morning, Helena lives like a sick person. A light breakfast. Comfortable clothes. A stack of unread magazines, and she parks herself in front of her big television. But the game shows and talk shows—normal fare when she's dying of the flu—can't seem more absurd or trivial. Which is why she finally changes into gardening clothes and slips into the backyard, telling herself more than once that she doesn't care how it would look if someone from the office were to drop by.

A little before noon, Sarah arrives home.

Helena is on her knees, fighting the good fight against creeping charlie. Just a glance tells her what is happening. The girl practically sprints from her car to her front door, and a moment later, curtains left open by her mother are closed, and the blinds are closed, and Helena can almost taste the air of expectation holding sway.

It's lunchtime at school, she reasons.

And she rises and removes her knee pads and moves to the front yard with her favorite clippers in hand.

The tulips are in ruins. But the lilacs are at their peak. She clips free three lavender flowerheads, then wonders if she's an absolute idiot. But no, the deep heart-like thrumming of a stereo finds her, and she strolls off the end of the driveway just before the boy appears, finding her waiting in the street, her free hand lifting, demanding that he stops.

If anything, he seems worried.

Scared, even.

But he brakes and kills the music and rolls down the window, saying, "Yeah?" with a hint of anger in his voice. Abrupt, and very male. He seems to be asking himself who is this crazy lady standing between him and his girlfriend. "What is it?" he sputters. Then, "Ma'am."

"Give her these flowers," Helena tells him.

He notices the lilacs. Finally.

And a wave of recognition grabs him. He blinks and glances at her face, then at her house. He barely looked at her face until now. And Helena isn't an ugly woman, even if she's nearly middle-aged. Men still appreciate her figure and her face, and she tries to show the best of both as she leans into the open window, forcing him to take her gift as she asks, "What's your name, son?"

He opens his mouth, then remembers to speak.

"Luke," he blurts.

"Luke," she repeats. And she stands again as he takes the flowers by their stalks. "My name is Helena."

He says, "Yeah. All right."

This isn't going well. Of course she had no idea any of this would happen today, or that it would ever happen. And she isn't even certain what she wants to accomplish now. But the panic builds on his splendid young face. His looks come from his mother, Helena decides. He has to suspect some kind of trouble. An old lady's trap is waiting. But he finally takes her little gift willingly, which is always a good sign.

Hoping to escape, the boy says, "Thank you."

"You're quite welcome, Luke."

Eyes forward. Hands on the wheel now.

Then she says it.

"Let me give you fair warning," she tells him. "Are you listening, Luke? You need to know. Sarah and her mother can be very hard on men. Unfair, and treacherous."

He looks straight ahead, and bristles.

Then without another word, he turns on his ugly music and drives away. Not slowly. But not moving fast, either.

Just once, Helena visited Callan in prison.

The arrangements were involved and laborious, mostly because he wasn't her relative and there was no child between them. Forms were filled out, then filed. Then she drove north and west for part of the day, coming to a small city dressed with concrete walls and endless reaches of electrified wire. Again, long forms demanded her attention, and her signature was matched against every signature on file. Then a pair of quiet women searched her thoroughly. Clothes. Hair. Mouth. Other cavities. Nobody expected to find anything, but it seemed important to embarrass Helena in enormous ways. Which is what they accomplished, sure enough.

Forty thousand men lived inside that strange and dangerous city. And the one man whom she had sought out was almost a stranger to her.

No carefree drunk was laughing at his plight.

Callan wore a long number on threadbare prison clothes, and he stared at his guest with a calm, steady, and irresistible anger. What had happened to him over the last few years, she could only imagine. Men were dangerous.

Always. But men living only with men, in such circumstances . . . it made her want to cry just to think about it. . . .

He said, "Helena."

He said, "So sit. If you want."

They were inside a large airless room part way filled with couples like themselves. A dozen couples, perhaps. But this was one of two visitation days in the month, and out of forty thousand inmates, only twenty of them had company.

A small tragedy, it was, set against the rest.

Quietly, without patience, Callan asked, "What do you want, Helena?"

"How are you?" she blurted.

He said, "Great, actually," and showed her a bleak little smile.

"Really?" she sputtered.

"Absolutely." Then he pulled up the sleeve of his jersey, making a muscle and showing a glimmer of the former Callan. "I'm sober now. And look how fit I've gotten. . . ."

She didn't notice the bicep. What caught her gaze was the star and crescent scars cut into his flesh. There was an odd cult popular among male inmates, she recalled. Something called Islam. It had its own prophet—a mystical man born in the Dark Ages—and its armies had attacked the remnants of the old Roman Empire. But the Pope, in her wisdom, managed to build a consensus. A union of nations. Divisions and schisms that had split the early Christians were healed, at least temporarily. Then loyal heroic men under the Pope's guidance had obliterated the Islamic armies. And for better than a thousand years, that religion had pretended to be extinct.

Callan meant to show off his scar.

And Helena had come here to tell him, "You didn't hit Lydia."

She blurted those words, then took a huge breath before adding, "I was watching you. You couldn't have. It was your son, I'm almost sure."

If anything, he seemed unsurprised by her declaration.

Bored, almost.

"I couldn't testify," she continued. "It would have been my word against Lydia's. And that wouldn't have changed anything."

Her lover nodded, and for the moment, he seemed to be hunting for the proper response. Then he quietly told her, "It doesn't particularly matter, Helena," and he leaned across the smooth plastic table, the steel links of his manacles rattling gently. "Do you know why it doesn't matter?"

"Why?" she squeaked.

"If my boy hadn't, I would have. Hit the bitch, I mean."

She sat motionless, feeling scared and sorry. And perfectly confused.

Then Callan sat back like the conquering hero, winked with a shadow of his old charm, and remarked in the most offhand manner, "Do you know what else? If I got out of here today, this minute, I'd do worse. A lot worse. To pretty much every one of you ugly slits."

Dies Mercurii.

Curiously, Helena wakes that next morning feeling ill, but despite a burning nausea and a suffocating fatigue, she dresses herself and fixes her hair, leaving for work just a few minutes late.

But a traffic tie-up pounces on her.

Nothing is moving at the intersection. Too late, Helena turns on her radio, listening to a bulletin about a bomb scare at the clinic. It takes the police forever to redirect the traffic around the roadblocks. She arrives late, and as a reward, she learns that Morris will be in meetings the entire morning. Three different women give her the news. "A reprieve," one of them calls it. Then the woman laughs and clucks her tongue, adding, "You really told him. Nobody thought you had the balls, Helena. But they're big as peaches, aren't they?"

All morning, Helena plans to lunch at home, allowing herself to build a robust little fantasy about herself and Sarah's boyfriend. She imagines them chatting amiably beside the lilacs. Then she'll lure him indoors on some errand that only a tall boy can manage . . . something in the bedroom . . . and what happens next changes each time she thinks about it, always reaching a point where she's aroused as well as frightened by her thoughts, and disgusted with herself, and in a strange way, thrilled by the feeling that she has absolutely no control over the flow of her sick, lonely mind.

But she doesn't drive home at noon.

Half a dozen co-workers want to take her to lunch instead. Their treat. And with no room for choice, it's easy to tell them "Yes."

The restaurant is squeezed inside a substantial old home. Antique photographs decorate the walls, most of them portraits dating back to the pioneer days. Beefy, frequently pregnant women stand in a row with their fellow disciples, their shared husbands kneeling down in front, each of the men looking scrawny and strong from constant work. Helena counts the faces on the nearest wall. Between the standing women and their kneeling men are the children. Maybe two smiling girls for every smiling boy. Accidents would have claimed a few of the missing. And disease, since they are the weaker sex. And the coming Asian wars will eventually slaughter them by the millions. But what astonishes and sickens Helena is that the boys are smiling, as are their fathers. These long-dead souls who couldn't own property, or vote, and who rarely even learned to read. Yet these aren't the pained grins of people staring into the sun. No, what she sees is the honest bright smiles of happy people looking at a future full of nothing but purpose, place and genuine promise.

Helena eats half of her lunch, if that.

A note is waiting on her desk when she returns.

"Come see me," it reads. Then the sloppy signature: "Morris."

His office is larger than hers, and more important. Yet when he looks up, Helena's first impulse is to laugh. Morris is a very odd creature, and she can't help herself sometimes. But instead of laughing, she simply says, "Yes, sir."

"Close the door," he begins.

There are new laws, and new ways of gaining retribution. Which is why she says, "I think we'd both like to keep the door open. Just to avoid misunderstandings."

Morris blinks, then mutters, "Fine."

He says, "Then why don't you sit. If that's all right, Helena."

She settles in front of his desk.

The man shakes his head. Then with a practiced air, he asks, "Have you recovered from all that beer?"

"Yes."

"Good." He clicks his tongue with a measured disgust, then tells her, "I'm going to blame the insults on your drinking. I want you to know that."

He wants her to relax. To say, "Thank you so much, sir."

Instead, she picks up the framed photograph set on his desk. It is his family again, perhaps two years ago. The wife looks younger and prettier, but Morris himself is unchanged. And his son is shorter, and infinitely younger, looking lost among all those smiling girls. Quietly, she asks, "What sort of boy is he?"

Morris blinks. Asks, "Who?"

"Luke," she says. Too quickly.

But he decides that he's mentioned his son's name in the past. And maybe he has. Maybe he simply doesn't remember. With a measured fondness, Morris says, "He's a good child."

"Good in school?" she inquires.

"In all things. Why?"

The diamond-shaped scar is missing from the cheek. In a world currently without wars and no quick way to prove themselves to women, young men try to follow the old ways, giving each other elaborate wounds for no better purpose than to show that they can be stupid, without anyone's help.

"Thank you, sir," she says finally. "It was the beer. Yes."

Thinking that he has won, Morris grins.

She sets down the portrait, and sighs, and as she rises, she asks, "Is that all?"

"You were late this morning," he offers.

She mentions the bomb scare at the clinic.

Which Morris already knows about. He nods and sneers, telling Helena and everyone eavesdropping on them, "I hate the idiots. These self-proclaimed warriors for morality and justice. . . !"

She stares at a random point, saying nothing.

"This is the fairest, richest society on the planet," Morris promises.

Which Helena believes, too. Always, and she could never make herself think otherwise. Yet she hasn't the breath to tell him that she agrees with him. The best she manages is a vague nod and an expression that might be confused for a smile. Then with a quiet tone, she points out, "In this society of ours, you've done extremely well."

Believing that this is a compliment, Morris nods, and halfway laughs, and says, "I like to think so. I do!"

Dies Jovis.

Awake well before dawn, Helena dresses in comfortable trousers and a warm shirt, eats a toasted muffin, sips strong coffee, and while it's still dark outside, she leaves home.

A simple clarity has possessed her. She promises herself that she'll call work from a toll phone. A day of personal time, she'll request; some nebulous family business demanding her attention. In her mind and whispers, she practices her conversation with the receptionist, and if necessary, with Morris. But then the sun is up, and there aren't any phones to be found, and it's gotten too late to call now anyway. And that's when she discovers that she doesn't particularly care, her guilt tiny and easily buried under things ancient and huge.

Every passing town has its church. A sect or schism was brought by the first disciples to settle these lands, and a century later, the same flavors of

Christianity hold sway. The shape of the church is a clue about the faithful within. The buildings can be round and soft-edged, or they can be tall and imposing. Granite and marble are popular in the oldest sects, while the newish Unity houses—still found only in the cities—are elegant, friendly structures filled with sunshine and empty crosses.

By contrast, Helena's childhood church was a simple, almost Spartan building, its foundation made of native rock and bone-white mortar, its walls and roof and hard pews made from whatever wood was cheapest on that particular day. But as a girl, it seemed like a wonderful structure. Beautiful, even. Helena wanted to believe that other girls and boys envied her for having such a pretty church. What she liked best—long before she understood the painful symbolism—was the building's color. In her mother's sect, a house of worship was always painted a brilliant crimson. Every wall, every cornice, and even the wooden slats on the roof. The blood of the Christ, for all the world to see.

That's what Helena was eventually taught, by the priests and by Aunt Ester.

Years later, she can't even pretend to remember much of the Scriptures. What comes back now are a few poetic phrases, plus the lurid, sad, and endless stories that Ester told with a tireless zeal. What she remembers is her horror, then deep anger, at the idea that Joseph would abandon Mary when she gave birth to God's daughter. Because the Savior couldn't be a woman, that man had believed. "And that was the first sin of the men," Ester would remind her. "But not their worst sin. Not by a long, long ways."

Helena's favorite Gospel is Judith's. She was a prostitute turned disciple, as several of her sister disciples were, and she wrote about the love and redemption offered by her Savior, and the peace that will find everyone in Heaven.

Cora's Gospel is her aunt's linchpin—a harsh, explicit text written by a noblewoman who carefully listed the tortures inflicted on the Christ by the Jews, then by all men. But even inside that wrenching work, there is forgiveness. And a kind of morality. Like the old Roman centurion who placed himself between the soldiers and the Christ, ordering the rapes to end, then giving the condemned prisoner a long sip of water mixed with wine.

But Ester always refused to see the man's kindness.

Quietly but not softly, she would remind her niece, "That man still helped them carry out the sentence. The punishment. Our Savior was hammered onto that cross and put up into the sun, naked except for the blood flowing from her scalp and her hands, and from her brutalized vagina."

Helena remembers crying and asking a little question of her aunt.

She can't recall her exact words. But it was about men. Were they all so awful? she wondered aloud. Are they always so untrustworthy, and cruel?

She very much remembers Ester smiling instantly.

Surprising Helena.

Then with a wink and dry quick kiss to the forehead, Ester told the doubting young girl, "No, honey. No. We won't let them act that way again. Ever!"

Within sight of her childhood home, Helena turns onto a side road.

She drives slowly and carefully, following what is little more than a pair of ruts across a stony pasture. If she gets stuck now, people will find out. Mother will, and Ester. And for every reason, that would be intolerable.

A little thicket of wind-beaten trees stands at the crest of the hill. Helena parks where she won't be obvious, and after the long drive, she needs a moment to stretch and regain her legs. The walk itself takes just a moment. Her heart has been pounding for a long while, and her breathing is quick and shallow. But her head is clear, perfectly focused. What she assumes will be the difficult trick—finding the exact spot—proves easy. A slab of pink granite, brought by the glaciers and gouged by their sliding mass, lies in the center of a tiny clearing. With trees on all sides and a few spring wildflowers blooming amidst the green grass, this ground could be confused for a garden. A wind blows, cool and damp. Then Helena hears someone sighing. She gives a start, then realizes it was her own sigh. She is that nervous. That ill at ease. So she tells herself to breathe deeply until she feels steadier, and stronger, and only then does she kneel beside the flat pink rock, knowing its feel before her fingers can touch it.

This is where they brought Helena's baby brother.

Ester and the other disciples walked up here to pray over the newborn, and Helena remained in the house, quietly caring for her exhausted mother.

She already had boy cousins, and just last year, two other women in the house had given birth to sons. Facts that she understood, even as a child. Hadn't she been taught from the beginning that farms needed only so many hands, particularly with the new tractors and pesticides making every chore easy? Didn't she understand that for the last fifteen centuries, give or take, God had willingly, even happily taken away the souls of boys who wouldn't live out the day? This was how things were done. It wasn't to be talked about, ever. It was a private family matter, and it was their family's business. Ester and Mother had spoken at length, night after night, until Mother agreed with what was best. But of course, they didn't know if it was a girl or a boy. Helena could have found herself with a sister. That was a vivid, buoyant hope that lasted right up until the little penis stuck out at them. And really, she would have preferred a baby sister. That's what she kept telling herself, and telling herself, cleaning her mother with old towels and neither of them speaking a word until Ester and the other women returned, nothing in their hands but an empty blanket too small to do anything but swaddle a little baby.

Helena can remember bolting past them, out the back door and into the snow.

It was mid-winter. Cold and windy, with the land white and hard. She wasn't a fast runner, but the women were even slower. Helena followed the footprints in the snow. She reached the hilltop first, expecting to find a coyote chewing on her little brother. But there was no baby. Just more footprints, and the granite slab, and she stood on the slab until Ester put a big hand on her shoulder, gasping hard, throwing her own coat over the girl to keep her warm. Saying to her, "There wasn't any pain, darling. No suffering at all."

Which was a good thing, wasn't it? But why was Helena crying?

Then Ester pulled her from the rock, telling her, "You should let him rest now. All right? Let him have his peace."

Peace was another good thing.

"Where did you put him?" Helena remembers asking.

"In a grave. Of course." Her aunt kneeled now. A big woman incapable of feeling the snow and the cold, she looked at her niece with dry hard eyes, then calmly reported, "I dug the grave last autumn. In case."

Looking down at the stone, Helena realized that it had just been set there. And she kneeled, trying to reach under it, struggling to pull it up and bring out the boy before he suffocated. And then someone else grabbed her, someone who could cry, familiar hands tugging as the woman sobbed, her mother's spent voice saying, "It's too late, darling. Honey. It's for the best. Just try to believe that, will you. . . ?"

Along one edge of the pink slab was a different shade of pink—a vivid smear of blood already frozen hard and slick by the brutal chill.

Long washed away by rains and melting snow, the blood is. Yet the woman puts her face to the stone now, kissing the exact place, and for an instant, if that, she can taste the salt and the rust of all the world's dead.

Helena drives back into the city without recalling the intervening miles. It's a wonder that she didn't have an accident along the way. But she arrives just after noon, driving slowly past her house and turning the corner, the boy's ugly little car parked in front of Lydia's house. Helena isn't sure about anything. What she wants is as a mystery to her. For that moment, she tries desperately to find some way of gaining control over the boy. Maybe she can threaten to tell his father about his sexual adventures. Or she can threaten to tell the police about his stealing her tulips and lilacs. A groundless complaint on a young man's record is almost impossible to remove, she knows. What matters is that she can gain some powerful, persistent role in his life. Then, she tells herself, she can protect him from the countless hazards in a world far too large for anyone to understand.

She hears herself—her silly, half-crazy thoughts bringing her nothing but shame—and now she watches herself drive past Lydia's house and around the block again, then out onto Saint Judith, not stopping until she reaches the clinic.

Today, it seems quiet. Peaceful. A light rain is falling, and only the most determined protesters have shown up. Helena parks up the street and walks toward the low brick building. A bearded man puts down his sign and approaches. "You don't want to go in there," he tells her.

She says to him, pointblank, "Why? Are you going to give me what I want?"

He blinks, and gasps softly.

"There aren't any men in my life," she continues. "And if you haven't noticed, I'm not a young woman anymore."

Not another word comes from the protesters.

The cameras pay close attention to Helena, recording her calm, determined features in case she proves to be a new activist. Inside the front office, she remembers to smile. The receptionist has forms ready to be filled out. A nurse takes her into an examination room and asks general questions about her history and present health. Then the nurse leaves, and after a little while, the doctor appears. A man, of all things. Isn't that interesting? Each remembers to smile at the other. Sitting across from Helena, the doctor flips through the forms twice. Then with a puzzled tone, he says, "Is this an oversight? You didn't check your preference box."

"Let me see," says Helena.

He hands the clipboard and forms to her, and waits.

Then she hands them back again, saying, "You're right. I didn't check either one."

The relentless amazement makes her smile again, and with a quiet certainty, she adds, "Really, sir. One way or the other. It will be what it will be." ○

William Sanders

William Sanders has published many stories in this magazine and elsewhere, as well as numerous novels of SF, fantasy, mystery, and suspense. His newest science fiction novel, *J.*, was published this summer. In his latest tale, he takes a disturbing look at a time . . .

WHEN THIS WORLD IS ALL ON FIRE

"Squatters," Jimmy Lonekiller said as he swung the jeep off the narrow old blacktop onto the narrower and older gravel side road. "I can't believe we got squatters again."

Sitting beside him, bracing himself against the bumping and bouncing, Sergeant Davis Blackbear said, "Better get used to it. We kick this bunch out, there'll be more."

Jimmy Lonekiller nodded. "Guess that's right," he said. "They're not gonna give up, are they?"

He was a husky, dark-skinned young man, and tall for a Cherokee; among the women of the reservation, he was generally considered something of a hunk. His khaki uniform was neat and crisply pressed, despite the oppressive heat. Davis Blackbear, feeling his own shirt wilting and sticking to his skin, wondered how he did it. Maybe fullbloods didn't sweat as much. Or maybe it was something to do with being young.

Davis said, "Would you? Give up, I mean, if you were in their shoes?"

Jimmy didn't reply for a moment, being busy fighting the wheel as the jeep slammed over a series of potholes. They were on a really bad stretch now, the road narrowed to a single-lane dirt snaketrack; the overhanging trees on either side, heavy with dust-greyed festoons of kudzu vine, shut out the sun without doing anything much about the heat. This was an out-of-the-way part of the reservation; Davis had had to check the map at the tribal police headquarters to make sure he knew how to get here.

The road began to climb now, up the side of a steep hill. The jeep slowed to not much better than walking speed; the locally distilled alcohol might burn cooler and cleaner than gasoline but it had no power at all. Jimmy Lonekiller spoke then: "Don't guess I would, you put it that way. Got to go somewhere, poor bastards."

They were speaking English; Davis was Oklahoma Cherokee, having moved to the North Carolina reservation only a dozen years ago, when he married a Qualla Band woman. He could understand the Eastern dialect fairly well by now, enough for cop purposes anyway, but he still wasn't up to a real conversation.

"Still," Jimmy went on, "you got to admit it's a hell of a thing. Twenty-first century, better than five hundred years after Columbus, and here we are again with white people trying to settle on our land. What little bit we've got left," he said, glancing around at the dusty woods. "There's gotta be somewhere else they can go."

"Except," Davis said, "somebody's already there too."

"Probably so," Jimmy admitted. "Seems like they're running out of places for people to be."

He steered the jeep around a rutted hairpin bend, while Davis turned the last phrase over in his mind, enjoying the simple precision of it: running out of places for people to be, that was the exact and very well-put truth. Half of Louisiana and more than half of Florida under water now, the rest of the coastline inundated, Miami and Mobile and Savannah and most of Houston, and, despite great and expensive efforts, New Orleans too.

And lots more land, farther inland, that might as well be submerged for all the good it did anybody: all that once-rich farm country in southern Georgia and Alabama and Mississippi, too hot and dry now to grow anything, harrowed by tornadoes and dust storms, while raging fires destroyed the last remnants of the pine forests and the cypress groves of the dried-up swamplands. Not to mention the quake, last year, shattering Memphis and eastern Arkansas, demolishing the levees and turning the Mississippi loose on what was left of the Delta country. Seemed everybody either had way too much water or not enough.

He'd heard a black preacher, on the radio, declare that it was all God's judgment on the South because of slavery and racism. But that was bullshit; plenty of other parts of the country were getting it just as bad. Like Manhattan, or San Francisco—and he didn't even want to think about what it must be like in places like Arizona. And Africa, oh, Jesus. Nobody in the world wanted to think about Africa now.

The road leveled out at the top of the hill and he pointed. "Pull over there. I want to do a quick scout before we drive up."

Jimmy stopped the jeep and Davis climbed out and stood in the middle of the dirt road. "Well," Jimmy said, getting out too, "I wish somebody else would get the job of running them off now and then." He gave Davis a mocking look. "It's what I get, letting myself get partnered with an old 'breed. Everybody knows why Ridge always puts you in charge of the evictions."

Davis didn't rise to the bait; he knew what Jimmy was getting at. It was something of a standing joke among the reservation police that Davis always got any jobs that involved dealing with white people. Captain Ridge claimed it was because of his years of experience on the Tulsa PD, but Jimmy and others claimed it was really because he was quarter-blood and didn't look all that Indian and therefore might make whites less nervous.

In his own estimation, he didn't look particularly Indian or white or anything else, just an average-size man with a big bony face and too many wrinkles and dark brown hair that was now getting heavily streaked with gray. He doubted that his appearance inspired much confidence in people of any race.

The dust cloud was beginning to settle over the road behind them. A black-and-white van appeared, moving slowly, and pulled to a stop behind the jeep. Corporal Roy Smoke stuck his head out the window and said, "Here?"

"For now," Davis told him. "I'm going to go have a look, scope out the scene before we move in. You guys wait here." He turned. "Jimmy, you come with me."

The heat was brutal as they walked down the road, even in the shady patches. At the bottom of the hill, though, Davis led the way off the road and up a dry creek bed, and back in the woods it was a little cooler. Away from the road, there wasn't enough sunlight for the kudzu vines to take over, and beneath the trees the light was pleasantly soft and green. Still too damn dry, Davis thought, feeling leaves and twigs crunching under his boot soles. Another good reason to get this eviction done quickly; squatters tended to be careless with fire. The last bad woods fire on the reservation, a couple of months ago, had been started by a squatter family trying to cook a stolen hog.

They left the creek bed and walked through the woods, heading roughly eastward. "Hell," Jimmy murmured, "I know where this is now. They're on the old Birdshooter place, huh? Shit, nobody's lived there for years. Too rocky to grow anything, no water since the creek went dry."

Davis motioned for silence. Moving more slowly now, trying to step quietly though it wasn't easy in the dry underbrush, they worked their way to the crest of a low ridge. Through the trees, Davis could see a cleared area beyond. Motioning to Jimmy to wait, he moved up to the edge of the woods and paused in the shadow of a half-grown oak, and that was when he heard the singing.

At first he didn't even recognize it as singing; the sound was so high and clear and true that he took it for some sort of instrument. But after a second he realized it was a human voice, though a voice like none he'd ever heard. He couldn't make out the words, but the sound alone was enough to make the hair stand up on his arms and neck, and the air suddenly felt cooler under the trees.

It took Davis a moment to get unstuck; he blinked rapidly and took a deep breath. Then, very cautiously, he peered around the trunk of the oak.

The clearing wasn't very big; wasn't very clear, either, any more, having been taken over by brush and weeds. In the middle stood the ruins of a small frame house, its windows smashed and its roof fallen in.

Near the wrecked house sat a green pickup truck, its bed covered with a boxy, homemade-looking camper shell—plywood, it looked like from where Davis stood, and painted a dull uneven gray. The truck's own finish was badly faded and scabbed with rust; the near front fender was crumpled. Davis couldn't see any license plates.

A kind of lean-to had been erected at the rear of the truck, a sagging blue plastic tarp with guy-ropes tied to trees and bushes. As Davis watched, a lean, long-faced man in bib overalls and a red baseball cap came out from under the tarp and stood looking about.

Then the red-haired girl came around the front of the truck, still singing, the words clear now:

"Oh, when this world is all on fire
Where you gonna go?
Where you gonna go?"

She was, Davis guessed, maybe twelve or thirteen, though he couldn't really tell at this distance. Not much of her, anyway; he didn't figure she'd go over eighty pounds or so. Her light blue dress was short and sleeveless, revealing thin pale arms and legs. All in all, it didn't seem possible for all that sound to be coming from such a wispy little girl; and yet there was no doubt about it, he could see her mouth moving:

"Oh, when this world is all on fire
Where you gonna go?"

The tune was a simple one, an old-fashioned modal-sounding melody line, slow and without a pronounced rhythm. It didn't matter; nothing mattered but that voice. It soared through the still mountain air like a whippoorwill calling beside a running stream. Davis felt his throat go very tight.

"Run to the mountains to hide your face
Never find no hiding place
Oh, when this world is all on fire
Where you gonna go?"

The man in the baseball cap put his hands on his hips. "Eva May!" he shouted.

The girl stopped singing and turned. Her red hair hung down her back almost to her waist. "Yes, Daddy?" she called.

"Quit the damn fooling around," the man yelled. His voice was rough, with the practiced anger of the permanently angry man. "Go help your brother with the fire."

Fire? Davis spotted it then, a thin trace of bluish-white smoke rising from somewhere on the far side of the parked truck. "Shit!" he said soundlessly, and turned and began picking his way back down the brushy slope.

"What's happening?" Jimmy Lonekiller said as Davis reappeared. "What was that music? Sounded like—"

"Quiet," Davis said. "Come on. We need to hurry."

"Go," Davis said to Jimmy as they turned off the road and up the brush-choked track through the trees. "No use trying to sneak up. They've heard us coming by now."

Sure enough, the squatters were already standing in the middle of the clearing, watching, as the jeep bumped to a stop in front of them. The man in the red baseball cap stood in the middle, his face dark with anger. Beside him stood a washed-out-looking blond woman in a faded flower-print dress, and, next to her, a tall teenage boy wearing ragged jeans and no shirt. The boy's hair had been cropped down almost flush with his scalp.

The woman was holding a small baby to her chest. Great, Davis thought with a flash of anger, just what a bunch of homeless drifters needed. Running out of places for people to be, but not out of people, hell, no. . . .

The red-haired girl was standing off to one side, arms folded. Close up, Davis revised his estimate of her age; she had to be in her middle to late teens at least. There didn't appear to be much of a body under that thin blue dress, but it was definitely not that of a child. Her face, as she watched the two men get out of the jeep, was calm and without expression.

The van came rocking and swaying up the trail and stopped behind the jeep. Davis waited while Roy Smoke and the other four men got out—quite a force to evict one raggedy-ass family, but Captain Ridge believed in being careful—and then he walked over to the waiting squatters and said, "Morning. Where you folks from?"

The man in the red baseball cap spat on the ground, not taking his eyes off Davis. "Go to hell, Indian."

Oh oh. Going to be like that, was it? Davis said formally, "Sir, you're on Cherokee reservation land. Camping isn't allowed except by permit and in designated areas. I'll have to ask you to move out."

The woman said, "Oh, why can't you leave us alone? We're not hurting anybody. You people have all this land, why won't you share it?"

We tried that, lady, Davis thought, and look where it got us. Aloud he said, "Ma'am, the laws are made by the government of the Cherokee nation. I just enforce them."

"Nation!" The man snorted. "Bunch of woods niggers, hogging good land while white people starve. You got no right."

"I'm not here to argue about it," Davis said. "I'm just here to tell you you've got to move on."

The boy spoke up suddenly. "You planning to make us?"

Davis looked at him. Seventeen or eighteen, he guessed, punk-mean around the eyes and that Johnny Pissoff stance that they seemed to develop at that age; ropy muscles showing under bare white skin, forearms rippling visibly as he clenched both fists.

"Yes," Davis told him. "If necessary, we'll move you."

To the father—he assumed—he added, "I'm hoping you won't make it necessary. If you like, we'll give you a hand—"

He didn't get to finish. That was when the boy came at him, fists up, head hunched down between his shoulders, screaming as he charged: "*Redskin motherfu—*"

Davis shifted his weight, caught the wild swing in a cross-arm block, grasped the kid's wrist and elbow and pivoted, all in one smooth motion. The boy yelped in pain as he hit the ground, and then grunted as Jimmy Lonekiller landed on top of him, handcuffs ready.

The man in the red cap had taken a step forward, but he stopped as Roy Smoke moved in front of him and tapped him gently on the chest with his nightstick. "No," Roy said, "you don't want to do that. Stand still, now."

Davis said, "Wait up, Jimmy," and then to the man in the red cap, "All right, there's two ways we can do this. We can take this boy to Cherokee town and charge him with assaulting an officer, and he can spend the next couple of months helping us fix the roads. Probably do him a world of good."

"No," the woman cried. The baby in her arms was wailing now, a thin weak piping against her chest, but she made no move to quiet it. "Please, no."

"Or," Davis went on, "you can move out of here, right now, without any more trouble, and I'll let you take him with you."

The girl, he noticed, hadn't moved the whole time, just stood there watching with no particular expression on her face, except that there might be a tiny trace of a smile on her lips as she looked at the boy on the ground.

"No," the woman said again. "Vernon, no, you can't let them take Ricky—"

"All right," the man said. "We'll go, Indian. Let him up. He won't give you no more trouble. Ricky, behave yourself or I'll whup your ass."

Davis nodded to Jimmy Lonekiller, who released the kid. "Understand this," Davis said, "we don't give second warnings. If you're found on Cherokee land again, you'll be arrested, your vehicle will be impounded, and you might do a little time."

The boy was getting to his feet, rubbing his arm. The woman started to move toward him but the man said, "He's all right, damn it. Get busy packing up." He turned his head and scowled at the girl. "You too, Eva May."

Davis watched as the squatters began taking down the tarp. The girl's long red hair fairly glowed in the midday sun; he felt a crazy impulse to go over and touch it. He wished she'd sing some more, but he didn't imagine she felt like singing now.

He said, "Roy, have somebody kill that fire. Make sure it's dead and buried. This place is a woods fire waiting to happen."

Davis lived in a not very big trailer on the outskirts of Cherokee town. Once he had had a regular house, but after his wife had taken off, a few years ago, with that white lawyer from Gatlinburg, he'd moved out and let a young married couple have the place.

The trailer's air conditioning was just about shot, worn out from the constant unequal battle with the heat, but after the sun went down it wasn't too bad except on the hottest summer nights. Davis took off his uniform and hung it up and stretched out on the bed while darkness fell outside and the owls began calling in the trees. Sweating, waiting for the temperature to drop, he closed his eyes and heard again in his mind, over the rattle of the laboring air conditioner:

"Oh, when this world is all on fire
Where you gonna go?
Where you gonna go?"

It was the following week when he saw the girl again.

He was driving through Waynesville, taking one of the force's antique computers for repairs, when he saw her crossing the street up ahead. Even at half a block's distance, he was sure it was the same girl; there couldn't be another head of hair like that in these mountains. She was even wearing what looked like the same blue dress.

But he was caught in slow traffic, and she disappeared around the corner before he could get any closer. Sighing, making a face at himself for acting like a fool, he drove on. By the time he got to the computer shop, he had convinced himself it had all been his imagination.

He dropped off the computer and headed back through town, taking it easy and keeping a wary eye on the traffic, wondering as always how so many people still managed to drive, despite fuel shortages and sky-high prices; and all the new restrictions, not that anybody paid them any mind, the government having all it could do just keeping the country more or less together.

An ancient minivan, a mattress roped to its roof, made a sudden left turn from the opposite lane. Davis hit the brakes, cursing—a fenderbender in a tribal patrol car, that would really make the day—and that was when he saw the red-haired girl coming up the sidewalk on the other side of the street.

Some asshole behind him was honking; Davis put the car in motion again, going slow, looking for a parking place. There was a spot up near the next corner and he turned into it and got out and locked up the cruiser, all without stopping to think what he thought he was doing or why he was doing it.

He crossed the street and looked along the sidewalk, but he couldn't see the girl anywhere. He began walking back the way she'd been going, looking this way and that. The street was mostly lined with an assortment of small stores—leftovers, probably, from the days when Waynesville had been a busy tourist resort, before tourism became a meaningless concept—and he peered in through a few shop windows, without any luck.

He walked a couple of blocks that way and then decided she couldn't have gotten any farther in that little time. He turned and went back, and stopped at the corner and looked up and down the cross street, wondering if she could have gone that way. Fine Indian you are, he thought, one skinny little white girl with hair like a brush fire and you keep losing her.

Standing there, he became aware of a growing small commotion across the street, noises coming from the open door of the shop on the corner: voices raised, a sound of scuffling. A woman shouted, "No you don't—"

He ran across the street, dodging an oncoming BMW, and into the shop. It was an automatic cop reaction, unconnected to his search; but then immediately he saw the girl, struggling in the grip of a large steely-haired woman in a long black dress. "Stop fighting me," the woman was saying in a high strident voice. "Give me that, young lady. I'm calling the police—"

Davis said, "What's going on here?"

The woman looked around. "Oh," she said, looking pleased, not letting go the girl's arm. "I'm glad to see you, officer. I've got a little shoplifter for you."

The girl was looking at Davis too. If she recognized him she gave no sign. Her face was flushed, no doubt from the struggle, but still as expressionless as ever.

"What did she take?" Davis asked.

"This." The woman reached up and pried the girl's right hand open, revealing something shiny. "See, she's still holding it!"

Davis stepped forward and took the object from the girl's hand: a cheap-looking little pendant, silver or more likely silver-plated, in the shape of a running dog, with a flimsy neck chain attached.

"I want her arrested," the woman said. "I'll be glad to press charges. I'm tired of these people, coming around here ruining this town, stealing everyone blind."

Davis said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, I don't have any jurisdiction here. You'll need to call the local police."

She blinked, doing a kind of ladylike double-take, looking at Davis's uniform. "Oh. Excuse me, I thought—" She managed to stop before actually saying, "I thought you were a real policeman." It was there on her face, though.

Davis looked again at the pendant, turning it over in his hand, finding the little white price tag stuck on the back of the running dog: **$34.95.** A ripoff even in the present wildly inflated money; but after a moment he reached for his wallet and said, "Ma'am, how about if I just pay you for it?"

The woman started to speak and then stopped, her eyes locking on the wallet in his hand. Not doing much business these days, he guessed; who had money to waste on junk like this?

While she hesitated, Davis pulled out two twenties and laid them on the nearby counter top. "With a little extra to pay for your trouble," he added.

That did it. She let go the girl's arm and scooped up the money with the speed of a professional gambler. "All right," she said, "but get her out of here!"

The girl stood still, staring at Davis. The woman said, "I mean it! Right now!"

Davis tilted his head in the direction of the door. The girl nodded and started to move, not particularly fast. Davis followed her, hearing the woman's voice behind him: "And if you ever come back—"

Out on the sidewalk, Davis said, "I'm parked down this way."

She looked at him. "You arresting me?"

Her speaking voice—he realized suddenly that this was the first time he'd heard it—was surprisingly ordinary; soft and high, rather pleasant, but nothing to suggest what it could do in song. There was no fear in it, or in her face; she might have been asking what time it was.

Davis shook his head. "Like I told that woman, I don't have any authority here."

"So you can't make me go with you."

"No." he said. "But I'd say you need to get clear of this area pretty fast. She's liable to change her mind and call the law after all."

"Guess that's right. Okay." She fell in beside him, sticking her hands in the pockets of the blue dress. He noticed her feet were barely covered by a pair of old tennis shoes, so ragged they were practically sandals. "Never rode in a police car before."

As they came up to the parked cruiser he stopped and held out his hand. "Here. You might as well have this."

She took the pendant and held it up in front of her face, looking at it, swinging it from side to side. After a moment she slipped the chain over her head and tucked the pendant down the front of her dress. "Better hide it," she said. "Ricky sees it, he'll steal it for sure."

He said, "Not much of a thing to get arrested for."

She shrugged. "I like dogs. We had a dog, back home in Georgia, before we had to move. Daddy wouldn't let me take him along."

"Still," he said, "you could have gone to jail."

She shrugged, a slight movement of her small shoulders. "So? Wouldn't be no worse than how I got to live now."

"Yes it would," he told her. "You've got no idea what it's like in those forced-labor camps. How old are you?"

"Seventeen," she said. "Well, next month."

"Then you're an adult, as far's the law's concerned. Better watch it from now on." He opened the right door. "Get in."

She climbed into the car and he closed the door and went around. As he slid in under the wheel, she said, "Okay, I know what comes next. Where do you want to go?"

"What?" Davis looked at her, momentarily baffled. "Well, I was just going to take you home. Wherever your family—"

"Oh, come on." Her voice held an edge of scorn now. "You didn't get me out of there for nothing. You want something, just like everybody always does, and I know what it is because there ain't nothing else I got. Well, all right," she said. "I don't guess I mind. So where do you want to go to do it?"

For a moment, Davis was literally speechless. The idea simply hadn't occurred to him; he hadn't thought of her in that way at all. It surprised him, now he considered it. After all, she was a pretty young girl—you could have said beautiful, in a way—and he had been living alone for a long time. Yet so it was; he felt no stirrings of that kind toward this girl, not even now with her close up and practically offering herself.

When he could speak he said, "No, no. Not that. Believe me."

"Really?" She looked very skeptical. "Then what *do* you want?"

"Right now," he said, "I want to buy you a pair of shoes."

An hour or so later, coming out of the discount shoe store out by the highway, she said, "I know what this is all about. You feel bad because you run us off, back last week."

"No." Davis's voice held maybe a little bit more certainty than he felt, but he added, "Just doing my job. Anyway, you couldn't have stayed there. No water, nothing to eat, how would you live?"

"You still didn't have no right to run us off."

"Sure I did. It's our land," he said. "All we've got left."

She opened her mouth and he said, "Look, we're not going to talk about it, all right?"

They walked in silence the rest of the way across the parking lot. She kept looking down at her feet, admiring the new shoes. They weren't much, really, just basic white no-name sport shoes, but he supposed they looked pretty fine to her. At that they hadn't been all that cheap. In fact between the shoes and the pendant he'd managed to go through a couple days' pay. Not that he was likely to get paid any time soon; the tribe had been broke for a long time.

As he started the car, she said, "You sure you don't want to, you know, do it?"

He looked at her and she turned sidewise in the seat, moving her thin pale legs slightly apart, shifting her narrow hips. "Hey," she said, "somebody's gotta be the first. Might as well be you."

Her mouth quirked. "If it ain't you it'll prob'ly be Ricky. He sure keeps trying."

With some difficulty Davis said, "Turn around, please, and do up your safety belt."

"All right." She giggled softly. "Just don't know what it is you want from me, that's all."

He didn't respond until they were out of the parking lot and rolling down the road, back into Waynesville. Then he said, "Would you sing for me?"

"What?" Her voice registered real surprise. "Sing? You mean right now, right here in the car?"

"Yes," Davis said. "Please."

"Well, I be damn." She brushed back her hair and studied him for a minute. "You mean it, don't you? All right . . . what you want me to sing? If I know it."

"That song you were singing that morning up on the reservation," he said. "Just before we arrived."

She thought about it. "Oh," she said. "You mean—"

She tilted her head back and out it came, like a flood of clear spring water:

"Oh, when this world is all on fire
Where you gonna go?"

"Yes," Davis said very softly. "That's it. Sing it. Please."

* * *

Her family was staying in a refugee camp on the other side of town; a great hideous sprawl of cars and trucks and buses and campers and trailers of all makes and ages and states of repair, bright nylon tents and crude plastic-tarp shelters and pathetic, soggy arrangements of cardboard boxes, spread out over a once-beautiful valley.

"You better just drop me off here," the girl said as he turned off the road.

"That's okay," Davis said. "Which way do I go?"

At her reluctant direction, he steered slowly down a narrow muddy lane between parked vehicles and outlandish shelters, stopping now and then as children darted across in front of the car. People came out and stared as the big police cruiser rolled past. Somebody threw something unidentifiable, that bounced off the windshield leaving a yellowish smear. By now Davis was pretty sure this hadn't been a good idea.

But the girl said, "Up there," and there it was, the old truck with the homemade camper bed and the blue plastic awning rigged out behind, just like before. He stopped the car and got out and went around to open the passenger door.

The air was thick with wood smoke and the exhausts of worn-out engines, and the pervasive reek of human waste. The ground underfoot was soggy with mud and spilled motor oil and God knew what else. Davis looked around at the squalid scene, remembering what this area used to look like, only a few years ago. Now, it looked like the sort of thing they used to show on the news, in countries you'd never heard of. The refugee camps in Kosovo, during his long-ago army days, hadn't been this bad.

Beyond, up on the mountainsides, sunlight glinted on the windows of expensive houses. A lot of locals had thought it was wonderful, back when the rich people first started buying up land and building homes up in the mountain country, getting away from the heat and the flooding. They hadn't been as happy about the second invasion, a year or so later, by people bringing nothing but their desperation. . . .

Davis shook his head and opened the door. Even the depressing scene couldn't really get him down, right now. It had been an amazing experience, almost religious, driving along with that voice filling the dusty interior of the old cruiser; he felt light and loose, as if coming off a marijuana high. He found himself smiling—

A voice behind him said, "What the hell?" and then, "Eva May!"

He turned and saw the man standing there beside the truck, still wearing the red cap and the angry face. "Hello," he said, trying to look friendly or at least inoffensive. "Just giving your daughter a lift from town. Don't worry, she's not in any trouble—"

"Hell she's not," the man said, looking past Davis. "Eva May, git your ass out of that thing! What you doing riding around with this God-damn woods nigger?"

The girl swung her feet out of the car. Davis started to give her a hand but decided that might be a bad move right now. She got out and stepped past Davis. "It's all right, Daddy," she said. "He didn't do nothing bad. Look, he bought me some new shoes!"

"No shit." The man looked down at her feet, at the new shoes standing out white and clean against the muddy ground. "New shoes, huh? Git 'em off."

She stopped. "But Daddy—"

His hand came up fast; it made an audible crack against the side of her face. As she stumbled backward against the side of the truck he said, "God damn it, I *said* take them shoes off."

He spun about to face Davis. "You don't like that, Indian? Maybe you wanta do something about it?"

Davis did, in fact, want very much to beat this worthless *yoneg* within half an inch of his life. But he forced himself to stand still and keep his hands down at his sides. Start a punch-out in here, and almost certainly he'd wind up taking on half the men in the camp. Or using the gun on his belt, which would bring down a whole new kind of disaster.

Even then he might have gone for it, but he knew that anything he did to the man would later be taken out on Eva May. It was a pattern all too familiar to any cop.

She had one shoe off now and was jerking at the other, standing on one foot, leaning against the trailer, sobbing. She got it off and the man jerked it out of her hand. "Here." He half-turned and threw the shoe, hard, off somewhere beyond the old school bus that was parked across the lane. He bent down and picked up the other shoe and hurled it in the opposite direction.

"Ain't no damn Indian buying *nothing* for my kid," he said. "Or going anywhere *near* her. You understand that, Chief?"

From inside the camper came the sound of a baby crying. A woman's voice said, "Vernon? What's going on, Vernon?"

"Now," the man said, "you git out of here, woods nigger."

The blood was singing in Davis's ears and there was a taste in his mouth like old pennies. Still he managed to check himself, and to keep his voice steady as he said, "Sir, whatever you think of me, your daughter has a great gift. She should have the opportunity—"

"Listen close, Indian." The man's voice was low, now, and very intense. "You shut your mouth and you git back in that car and you drive outta here, right damn *now*, or else I'm gon' find out if you got the guts to use that gun. Plenty white men around here, be glad to help stomp your dirty red ass."

Davis glanced at Eva May, who was still leaning against the truck, weeping and holding the side of her face. Her bare white feet were already spotted with mud.

And then, because there was nothing else to do, he got back in the car and drove away. He didn't look back. There was nothing there he wanted to see; nothing he wouldn't already be seeing for a long time to come.

"Blackbear," Captain Ridge said, next morning. "I don't believe this."

He was seated at his desk in his office, looking up at Davis. His big dark face was not that of a happy man.

"I got a call just now," he said, "from the sheriff's office over in Waynesville. Seems a reservation officer, man about your size and wearing sergeant's stripes, picked up a teenage girl on the street. Made her get into a patrol car, tried to get her to have sex, even bought her presents to entice her. When she refused he took her back to the refugee camp and made threats against her family."

Davis said, "Captain—"

"No," Captain Ridge said, and slapped a hand down on his desk top. "No, Blackbear, I don't want to hear it. See, you're about to tell me it's a lot of bullshit, and I *know* it's a lot of bullshit, and it doesn't make a damn bit of difference. You listen to me, Blackbear. Whoever those people are, you stay away from them. You stay out of Waynesville, till I tell you different. On duty or off, I don't care."

He leaned back in his chair. "Because if you show up there again, you're going to be arrested—the sheriff just warned me—and there won't be a thing I can do about it. And you know what kind of chance you'll have in court over there. They like us even less than they do the squatters."

Davis said, "All right. I wasn't planning on it anyway."

But of course he went back. Later, he thought that the only surprising thing was that he waited as long as he did.

He went on Sunday morning. It was an off-duty day and he drove his own car; that, plus the nondescript civilian clothes he wore, ought to cut down the chances of his being recognized. He stopped at an all-hours one-stop in Maggie Valley and bought a pair of cheap sunglasses and a butt-ugly blue mesh-back cap with an emblem of a jumping fish on the front. Pulling the cap down low, checking himself out in the old Dodge's mirror, he decided he looked like a damn fool, but as camouflage it ought to help.

But when he got to the refugee camp he found it had all been for nothing. The truck was gone and so was Eva May's family; an elderly couple in a Buick were already setting up camp in the spot. No, they said, they didn't know anything; the place had been empty when they got here, just a little while ago.

Davis made a few cautious inquiries, without finding out much more. The woman in the school bus across the lane said she'd heard them leaving a little before daylight. She had no idea where they'd gone and doubted if anyone else did.

"People come and go," she said. "There's no keeping track. And they weren't what you'd call friendly neighbors."

Well, Davis thought as he drove back to the reservation, so much for that. He felt sad and empty inside, and disgusted with himself for feeling that way. Good thing the bars and liquor stores weren't open on Sunday; he could easily go on a serious drunk right now.

He was coming over the mountains east of Cherokee when he saw the smoke.

It was the worst fire of the decade. And could have been much worse; if the wind had shifted just right, it might have taken out the whole reservation. As it was, it was three days before the fire front crossed the reservation border and became somebody else's problem.

For Davis Blackbear it was a very long three days. Afterward, he estimated that he might have gotten three or four hours of sleep the whole time. None of the tribal police got any real time off, the whole time; it was one job after another, evacuating people from the fire's path, setting up roadblocks, keeping traffic unsnarled, and, in the rare times there was nothing else to do, joining the brutally overworked firefighting crews. By now almost every able-bodied man in the tribe was helping fight the blaze; or else already out of action, being treated for burns or smoke inhalation or heat stroke.

At last the fire ate its way over the reservation boundary and into the national parkland beyond; and a few hours later, as Wednesday's sun slid down over the mountains, Davis Blackbear returned to his trailer and fell across the bed, without bothering to remove his sweaty uniform or even to kick off his ruined shoes. And lay like a dead man through the rest of the day and all through the night, until the next morning's light came in the trailer's windows; and then he got up and undressed and went back to bed and slept some more.

A little before noon he woke again, and knew before he opened his eyes what he was going to do.

Captain Ridge had told him to take the day off and rest up; but Ridge wasn't around when Davis came by the station, and nobody paid any attention when Davis left his car and drove off in one of the jeeps. Or stopped him when he drove past the roadblocks that were still in place around the fire zone; everybody was too exhausted to ask unnecessary questions.

It was a little disorienting, driving across the still-smoking land; the destruction had been so complete that nothing was recognizable. He almost missed a couple of turns before he found the place he was looking for.

A big green pickup truck was parked beside the road, bearing the insignia of the U.S. Forest Service. A big stocky white man in a green uniform stood beside it, watching as Davis drove up and parked the jeep and got out. "Afternoon," he said.

He stuck out a hand as Davis walked across the road. "Bob Lindblad," he said as Davis shook his hand. "Fire inspector. They sent me down to have a look, seeing as it's on federal land now."

He looked around and shook his head. "Hell of a thing," he said, and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

It certainly was a strange-looking scene. On the northeast side of the road, there was nothing but ruin, an ash-covered desolation studded with charred tree stumps, stretching up the hillside and over the ridge and out of sight. The other side of the road, however, appeared untouched; except for a thin coating of powdery ash on the bushes and the kudzu vines, it looked exactly as it had when Davis had come this way a couple of weeks ago.

The Forest Service man said, "Anybody live around here?"

"Not close, no. Used to be a family named Birdshooter, lived up that way, but they moved out a long time ago."

Lindblad nodded. "I saw some house foundations."

Davis said, "This was where it started?"

"Where it *was* started," Lindblad said. "Yes."

"Somebody set it?"

"No question about it." Lindblad waved a big hand. "Signs all over the place. They set it at half a dozen points along this road. The wind was at their backs, out of the southwest—that's why the other side of the road didn't take—so they weren't in any danger. Bastards," he added.

Davis said, "Find anything to show who did it?"

Lindblad shook his head. "Been too much traffic up and down this road, last few days, to make any sense of the tracks. I'm still looking, though."

"All right if I look around too?" Davis asked.

"Sure. Just holler," Lindblad said, "if you find anything. I'll be somewhere close by."

He walked off up the hill, his shoes kicking up little white puffs of ash. Davis watched him a minute and then started to walk along the road, looking at the chewed-up surface. The Forest Service guy was right, he thought, no way in hell could anybody sort out all these tracks and ruts. Over on the unburned downhill side, somebody had almost gone into the ditch—

Davis almost missed it. A single step left or right, or the sun at a different angle, and he'd never have seen the tiny shininess at the bottom of the brush-choked ditch. He bent down and groped, pushing aside a clod of roadway dirt, and felt something tangle around his fingers. He tugged gently and it came free. He straightened up and held up his hand in front of his face.

The sun glinted off the little silver dog as it swung from side to side at the end of the broken chain.

Up on the hillside, Lindblad called, "Find anything?"

Davis turned and looked. Lindblad was poking around near the ruins of the old house, nearly hidden by a couple of black tree stubs. His back was to the road.

"No," Davis yelled back, walking across the road. "Not a thing."

He drew back his arm and hurled the pendant high out over the black-and-gray waste. It flashed for an instant against the sky before vanishing, falling somewhere on the burned earth. ○

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David Brin, Julie E. Czerneda, and James Van Pelt talk about SF in the classroom.

Neil Gaiman **September 25 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**

chats about his new novel, *American Gods.*

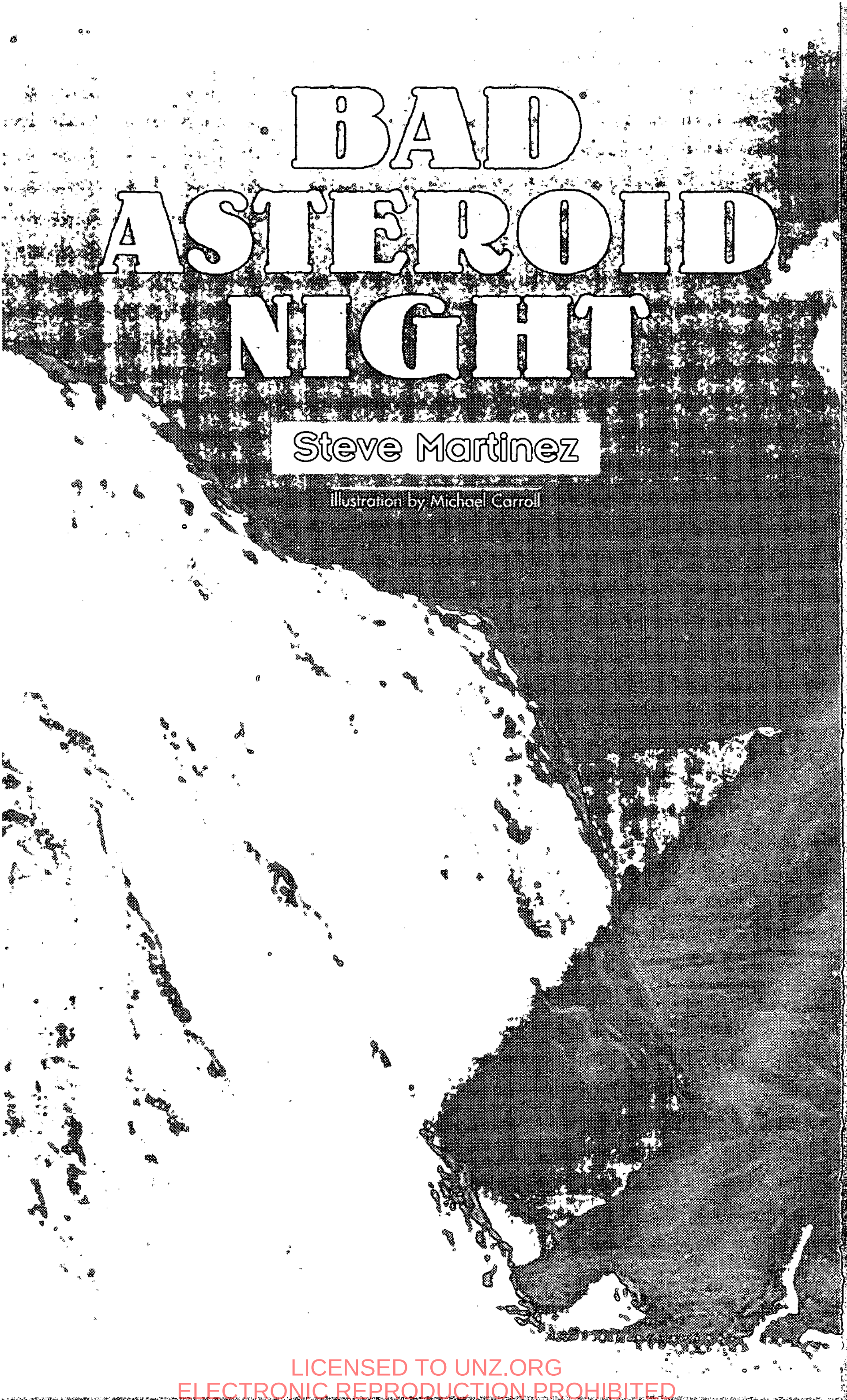
A Woman's Liberation **October 9 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**

Nancy Kress, Pat Murphy, Sheila Williams, Connie Willis, and Sara Zettel on the new Warner Aspect anthology.

Halloween **October 23 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**

Andy Duncan, Esther M. Friesner, and Lawrence Watt-Evans on the latest Ace anthology.

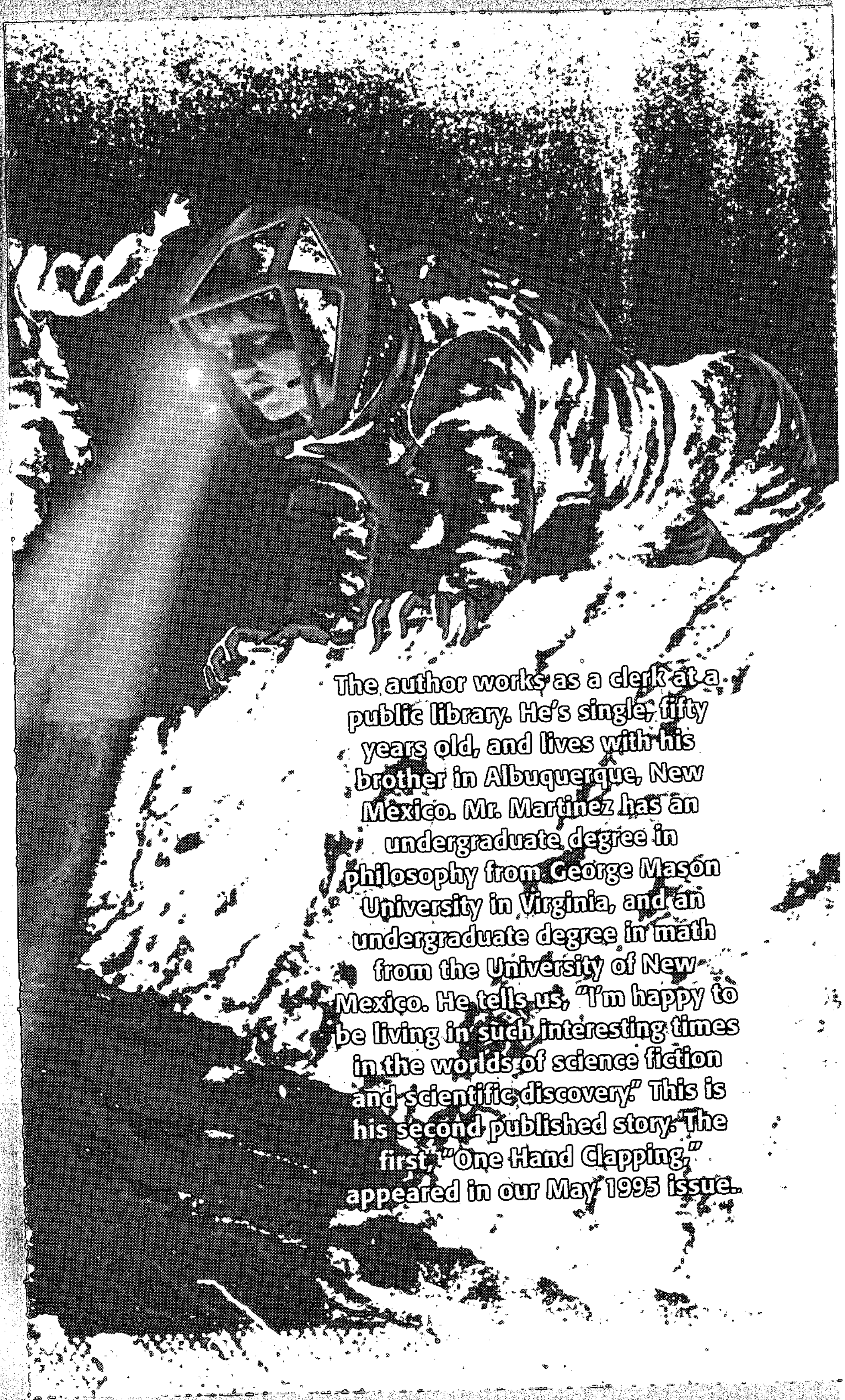
Go to **www.scifi.com/chat** or link to the chats via our home page (**www.asimovs.com**). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.



BAD ASTEROID NIGHT

Steve Martinez

Illustration by Michael Carroll



The author works as a clerk at a public library. He's single, fifty years old, and lives with his brother in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Mr. Martinez has an undergraduate degree in philosophy from George Mason University in Virginia, and an undergraduate degree in math from the University of New Mexico. He tells us, "I'm happy to be living in such interesting times in the worlds of science fiction and scientific discovery." This is his second published story. The first, "One Hand Clapping," appeared in our May 1995 issue.

Sometimes, Trina envied the robots. There was never anything they'd rather be doing. Give them a new assignment and it became their whole reason for being. For four years, they had been trusted to work asteroid T-Berg 020, mining and replicating with no human presence. But somewhere in that span of time, someone had given them a new purpose, and managed to make off with nearly three billion dollars worth of processed ore and equipment, including a breeding stock of the very latest in self-replicating robots. And not one robot had sounded an alarm. In fact, the remaining robots continued to file a whole history of false reports to cover the theft. By the time a resupply ship with its crew of six arrived, the robots had conveniently forgotten everything that could incriminate them and were hard at work as if nothing had happened, a good two years behind schedule.

At least the hole was still there, properly dug and sealed off. Some of the precious volatiles were back in production. But there was no clue to what had happened. At least nothing Trina could see. Whoever had pulled this off had been thorough. She had almost given up looking for traces of memory, and had been trying to hack the security system to see how it might have been done. She was the official robot jockey of the crew, so everybody was counting on her, especially the captain, so she pushed herself to exhaustion.

It was getting so bad that now Trina's dreams were blending into reality. She had fallen asleep at her desk with her cheek on one of her flat panel displays. In her dream, she pushed the color-coded program modules all over the screen like layer upon layer of jigsaw tiles, pushing them right off the screen onto the table as she went after something hiding beneath them, if only it would hold still, she was so tired, but she had to go on even when she began turning up pieces of teeth with long crusty roots and tiles covered with mucous, and bones that she cracked open, using one jagged piece to dig little white worms out of the marrow of the other.

She was awakened by the beeping of the com link, and scowled, confused to find her messy desk so similar to her dream. "Yes," she replied, looking sleepily over the array of data screens for the one that had beeped. It was the task scheduler, one of the robot overseers, asking for some kind of confirmation. It took a minute for Trina to look over the data and get a sense of what project she was being asked about. Apparently one of the robots, Willie 1-9, had gotten himself stuck down a fissure, and the vapors he'd kicked up before he broke his torch had frozen him solidly in place. "Current status?"

"Attempting to extricate Willie 1-9," replied a synthetic voice.

She grimaced and shook her head at the diversion of resources the scheduler was proposing. This was ridiculous. It would be cheaper to make a new Willie. "Interrupt task. Download Willie 1-9, memfile, all."

"Task interrupt. Download in progress." A string of corrupt file messages filled her screen, then, "Download complete."

"End task. Abandon Willie 1-9. Reassign task, task manager, um, Oversee 2-0."

"Confirm end task. Query. Task 'extricate Willie 1-9' does not exceed current budget parameters. Do you wish to reset current budget parameters for task 'extricate Willie class worker'? Estimate hours. Estimate resources. Estimate task priority. Please choose reset parameter."

Funny, the budget parameters were set way high. So then, why was it even asking for confirmation? Oh well, check into it later. "No. Retain current parameters. End task. Abandon Willie 1-9 through exception handler."

"ID confirmed. Authority confirmed. Resource protocol exception. Abandon Willie 1-9. Reassign task. Task manager Oversee 2-0."

Now she was wide awake. It could be nothing. Perhaps some strangeness of the dream had carried over—perhaps that and nothing more. Still, she was about to do a little digging when the light from the doorway was blocked by Captain Anders, suited up for an excursion except for his helmet and gloves. He held another spacesuit beside him, dangling like some poor crewman's fresh-peeled hide.

"Here we go off to the salt mines," he said, as if talking to the empty spacesuit, "while little miss princess gets to stay behind so she doesn't get her face dirty. What do we think of that?" Then he changed his voice and spoke out the side of his mouth while dangling his puppet beside him. "We think it sucks."

"Hey, this was your idea," said Trina, turning to face him. She expected him to sit across from her in her mini couch, but instead he came beside her and sat against the desk, his ankles crossed.

Up close, Trina recognized the spacesuit he was holding as her own and said, "Oh, did you change your mind?"

"No, I just didn't want to leave this by the airlock. We don't want you-know-who to see you're still here."

Trina didn't say anything. She just pulled her lips in and made a slight chewing motion, as she did sometimes when lost in thought, unaware of how monkeylike she looked. She came out of it blinking and puzzled by the amusement on the captain's face.

"Oh, and your transponder," he said, carefully removing it from the chest of her suit. "We'll take this with us so your blip will show up with ours in case he checks the roster."

"Seems like a lot of trouble."

"It's not so much trouble." He let the spacesuit hang folded over his hands like a dead animal, casual, or suggestive, Trina wasn't sure. "We'll only be gone a few hours. I'd take him along just to get him out of your hair, but then he'd be in *my* hair."

"I still don't see what's the big deal. We work together just fine."

"Yes, I know you do. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have any problem. But this isn't normal."

"What you mean is, *he's* not normal."

"Oh, that's what it is. You think this is personal? Trina, I don't know if I'm going to be able to trust you if you think I'm just going on some personal grudge against him."

"I didn't say that."

"Look, if he was a regular crewman, I wouldn't care how many arms he had, as long as he can do the work. But he's *not* a regular crewman. He's a protocol officer. What the hell is that? Have you seen his job description? Some kind of glorified safety inspector, is all I can make of it. With special authorities he can invoke. Hell, I don't even know if I outrank him. Let me ask you this—how come we never knew we needed one before? We sure as hell didn't need a protocol officer when we set up this place, so why now?"

"It's not his fault."

"I know. When you come right down to it, nothing is his fault. He didn't ask to be born, or made, or uncorked—whatever you call it. He didn't buy out our contracts. I hate to mess up your dreams, Trina, but I hope you weren't planning on working up to your own time-share condo on this berg or any other. You're working for Gnomonics, now."

"Doesn't matter. They've still got to honor our contracts."

"Your contract was with Novinco, back when people thought human beings would be settling out here. That's history. Novinco is just a subsidiary now. It's cheaper to breed ganglies to live in space. They're designed for it."

"But we've still got a contract."

"And what I'm saying is, we *used* to have a contract. Now we've got a contract plus a pair of beady little eyes to go along with it, watching over us. For our own safety. Right."

"Okay, so we just don't give them any grounds. . . ."

"That's going to be a little tricky right now, don't you think? I mean, we *are* missing a few billion dollars' worth of company property. Do you realize how they'd love to pin it on us?"

"But we're innocent!"

Captain Anders opened his mouth and slapped his head, then held up the spacesuit in front of him and spoke to it. "So what are you worried about, old timer?" When he released the suit, its beginning-to-fall was so slow it almost seemed to stand. Then he pushed it and it caved in like an octopus, descending into a gentle collapse on the couch. Trina copied the motion and sank back into her chair, feeling stupid.

"It's a perfect set-up," Anders continued. "The timing couldn't be better. That lawsuit with the Consortium has a lot of weight behind it. They could pull the plug on Gnomonics. In effect, Earth's ban on monkeying with human genes would be extended to the whole solar system. And all they have to prove is what's true, that the ganglies have been unlawfully deranged."

"I wouldn't call Rakshasa deranged."

"Whatever you call it. He's a piece of the company mind. There are certain thoughts he can't think because he has an unnatural loyalty to the company that made him."

"You can be a company man without being a gangly."

"Yeah, but at least a company man is still a *man*. Or a woman. We're all company men on this boat, but at least what *we* do is out of greed or lust or pity, whatever. I'm telling you, these guys have it inbred into them not to be *able* to think outside the company box. That's why he's here, because they want something here that's not one of us, someone who will file reports on us without the inconvenience of friendship or affection getting in the way." He frowned. "They don't even have to find us *guilty* of anything, just drag us into a courtroom and raise a cloud of suspicion. Because we're *human,* so, to their minds, that means we could be bribed, we could have been greedy, whatever. So some shareholders get to thinking maybe a special breed of demented workers doesn't look so bad after all. And Rakshasa is going to see everything the way the company wants him to see it. He'll stack all the facts against us in the worst light. The only way to really get off the hook is to come up with the big clue ourselves. Now do you see why I don't want him working on this with you?"

She nodded, and the captain continued. "Besides, I'd feel kind of guilty about leaving you alone with him if he knew you were here, you know what I mean?" She gave him a blank look. "It's just that, um, I don't think an artificial species can leave everything behind all at once, in one step. Because if I was him, I don't think a ganglyoid female would look all that—"

"Okay, I get it."

"Are you sure? I know you feel sorry for him."

"No. I see what you mean."

"You know why else I want you on this case? Because you're *better* than he is."

"Don't be so sure. He wasn't always a protocol officer, you know. He used to—"

"Academic stuff. You're the one with practical experience. Don't be so humble and innocent you can't grab the opportunity I'm giving you. If you come up with something good, you might be able to write your own ticket. I want you to get the credit. This is your puppy. Don't let any ganglyoid try to take it away from you. Look at me. You know I'm straight with my crew. You make up your own mind if I'm a good judge of who can do what. Just don't sell yourself short, okay? You can *do* this!"

She winced slightly, as if he'd just tousled her hair, and shrugged him off, but after he was gone and the door was closed, she couldn't help thinking that maybe he saw something in her she didn't see in herself. After all, he did have a way of being painfully honest in his dealings with the crew. It would mean so much to him if she could pull this off!

Not only that, but if he was so afraid of Rakshasa, maybe there *was* something to it. She knew she could be naïve at times. On the other hand, just because the captain was sincere didn't mean he had it *right*. Did he really think she was better at robotics than Rakshasa?

It took a while for such thoughts to simmer down. Now that the crew was gone, she opened her door to ward off claustrophobia, and settled down to work.

In the course of picking up lost threads, she came across the Willie 1-9 query once again, and remembered that something had puzzled her about it. Odd that such a unit would have generated such a high rescue priority. She began to dig. The last download of its memory wasn't the only one. There had been others, all garbled. And the rescue attempts went way back.

She began to get excited. Willie 1-9 had been stuck for nearly a year! His memory, if she could reconstruct it, might contain something that pre-dated the blackout period.

She fixed herself a sandwich and a cup of coffee and settled down to work. At last she had something that she could sink her teeth into. After two hours, and still not sure if she was on to something, an ungainly shadow fell across the doorway. The change didn't register in her mind directly, but when the delicately gathered butterflies of her thoughts suddenly blew away, she turned and saw Dr. Rakshasa standing there, looking a bit worried.

Despite his extra pair of arms, it was sometimes his face that caught her off guard. He wasn't disfigured, but his expressions seemed exaggerated sometimes, like a mask. She supposed it was because his head, like his long, withered limbs, seemed out of proportion to his almost child-sized body. It was hard to tell his age. There was no gray in his hair, cut short, almost like fur, but he was old enough to have crinkles around his eyes and weary lines around his mouth.

At the sight of her, he reflexively stuffed his arms into some of the many pockets of his jumpsuit and said, "Excuse me. I hope I didn't startle you."

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, trying to sound indignant, then remembered that *she* was the one who wasn't supposed to be here.

"Just out for a walk, trying to think a few things through, when I heard a noise. I thought you had gone with the others."

"No, I got out of it. Too much work to do."

"And it's the wrong kind of work, don't you agree? This project has been your dream, but now instead of moving on to the next phase, you're stuck with digging out of the wreckage. Looks as if you may have signed up on the wrong ship this time."

"Looks that way."

"There's something I've been meaning to tell you, but I don't quite know how, and I was wishing I could just get you alone for a moment, and then, all of a sudden, here you are. Are you sure you're not a figment of my imagination?"

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"It's not even that I *want* to talk to you. I feel I must, yet I wish I could spare you the burden." The worried look came over his face again, and he still made no move to enter or leave.

"It's no burden. Come in, sit down." She tossed the spacesuit behind the couch. "Would you like something to drink? Coffee? Juice? Tea?"

"Tea, please."

He sat somewhat stiffly at the edge of the couch, two hands resting on his knees, the other two holding the cup she handed to him. Trina turned her chair around and sat across from him.

"It's hard to say this," he began, "without sounding like the pompous ganglyoid the talk shows so often make us out to be. We can't help it, you know. It's hard not to be affected psychologically when you grow up with an extra set of arms. I'm sure you understand, hmm?"

"I don't know about that. I mean, I can imagine having four arms, and how very handy that must be, but I don't think I can imagine being used to it."

"Yes, you'd almost have to be a child again, out of the womb just long enough to take for granted a certain form and attitude. Well, try to imagine a young gangly in a classroom full of other gangly children. We are told every day that we are fully human, and yet when we study human history, I think we sometimes have a special difficulty identifying with it."

He sipped his cup of tea through its built-in straw, then continued. "We don't exactly thrive in Earth's gravity. So all we know of Earth is from a great height, and when you are young and your experience of life is benign, it's hard not to wonder whether, born into the ancient circumstances, we would commit the same horrors. Have our minds really crossed a threshold, or do we delude ourselves to think so? And without knowing for sure, we may sometimes assume an attitude that blinds our coworkers to any redeeming qualities we might have."

"Snooty."

"Even worse. I think our captain, for example, finds me threatening to an extent that interferes with his good judgment. I get the feeling he isn't telling me the real reason he doesn't want us to investigate this mystery together."

As he started to explain the advantages of working together, Trina glanced back at her screens and realized they were covered with data on the Willie 1-9 anomalies. And now Rakshasa was looking at them, too! She shut them down and whirled angrily to face him.

"Wait just a damn minute! You didn't come here looking for *me*. You came here to snoop through my data and see what I've found out! You had every reason to believe I'd be out there with the others!"

Rakshasa drew back from her outburst. His exaggerated features became a mask of surprise. "Yes, that's what I was led to believe, isn't it? Yet here you are. It puts me in an awkward position when someone in authority, like the captain, leads me to believe something and yet somehow, something in his manner raises a doubt in my mind. And then I have to wonder, am I being paranoid?" He paused.

"Besides, I really did hope I might discuss a certain matter with you, but perhaps I am doing more harm than good." He put his tea down and stood to go.

"Oh, Raki."

"I don't hold it against you, really. I'm sure it wasn't your idea."

"You guys are making me crazy. I wish the two of you would get together and have it out and just leave me out of it. I came here to do a job, and that's all I want to do. You make everybody crazy, you know that? It's like a pressure cooker in here. I've never seen a crew so crazy devious in all my life, and it's got something to do with you being here. Everybody's got more going on in their minds than they're telling me, and they all want me on their side, but I don't want to be on *anybody's* side. I just want to be left alone for a while and get some work done." She shook her head in frustration.

"God, look at the time. They'll be back pretty soon and I've got nothing to show for it. I was just getting started, and it's over. Larry will be wanting attention, Kira will want to confide in me, and the captain will want to see my progress, and I can't stand working with somebody looking over my shoulder, especially somebody who wants results and all I've got is a hunch. I just wish I could have one good day all to myself." She sighed.

"And yes, you're damn right it wasn't my idea!"

Rakshasa looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, then began to fumble through his pockets. "Perhaps I can at least grant you that one modest wish." Trina couldn't help becoming fascinated by the multiple sleight-of-hand show he put on as he fished out the flotsam of his pockets and passed it around from hand to hand, all kinds of little things disappearing and reappearing unexpectedly. When she realized what he was doing, she looked at his face and saw him watching her. It was a trick he pulled sometimes when he noticed her becoming hypnotized by his arms, just something he did to make her smile, though now it just made her wistful.

He found what he was looking for, a small datapad that he held in his lower arms, punching in some code, while he stuck the fingers of his upper hands into his ears. Trina thought he was clowning again, till she was jolted by the shriek of an alarm. The noise was everywhere, in her room, in the corridor, ringing hollow through the entire ship. Then silence, and a synthetic voice, unnaturally calm, said, "Warning, a magnitude seven solar flare event is now in progress. All personnel report to hardened shelters immediately."

The message repeated between bouts of wailing. Before Trina could say anything, Rakshasa motioned her to be quiet and spoke excitedly into his pad. "Captain, we've got a flare alert! Captain, come in, do you read me? Hello? Mayday! Mayday!"

Then the captain's voice, preoccupied, "Just a sec."

"Captain, get all your people back here immediately. You need to get to the shelters."

"Keep your pants on, spider-man. This cave is a class one shelter. Here's what we're going to do—okay, listen up, everybody. We may as well ride it out right here and get some work done, better than sitting on our butts in that tin can. Okay, check supplies."

The captain began conferring and assigning duties, then came back to Rakshasa, "Oh, by the way, Trina hasn't caught up with us yet. Make sure she gets to the shelter, will you?"

"Aye, captain," said Rakshasa, and signed off, looking very pleased with himself as he shut off the alarm.

Trina's heart was still pounding. "You just set off a false alarm?"

"Of course. That ought to get you at least a day of freedom."

"It's a little hard on the others, don't you think? I don't know if they can even pressurize that cave in a day. Jesus, when I said I wanted a little private time . . . maybe you'd better call it off."

"If they get in trouble, we'll bring them in. I am authorized to conduct unscheduled drills, you know."

"Maybe, but the captain is still going to kill you."

"No, I'll be too useful as a hate object. It will unify the crew, and show everyone he was right about me all along. Don't worry about him. He loves a good emergency, now and then. And you have your private time."

"And you have your revenge. On everybody." She shook her head. "Sheesh, I can't believe it. You must be a little bit crazy."

"You're quite welcome. It's the least I could do after barging in the way I did. I'll go now, and let you enjoy your solitude."

"You don't have to go. I always spout off. It doesn't mean anything. Sit down. You had something on your mind. What was it?"

"It can wait." He went to the door and then turned. "I was just wondering, as you examine the robots for signs of what took place, have you noticed a certain agitation among them?"

"Agitation?"

"It's hard to describe. Normally the human presence among them is part of the background of their awareness, like the weather. But since we arrived, they seem almost skittish. I've been trying to get them adjusted to their new circumstances, and they overshoot the mark trying to anticipate my intentions. Instead of pushing them along I've got to hold them back. Maybe their thought processes have simply evolved in the time they were left alone, or perhaps the pirates somehow disturbed their collective psyche."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. They *do* have a psyche, you know. Let me know if I can be of assistance."

Trina was in shock for a little while. Then it began to sink in that she had some time to work with, and no reason to feel guilty about it. It wasn't *her* fault. And once she'd gotten used to that fact, she found that she was indeed onto something with those pieces of Willie 1-9's mind. It was like finding fragments of something that had once been alive, except that these fragments did not belong to the world of material things. They were little nothings in themselves, pieces of wanting-to-assemble, but what they wanted to assemble depended on what pattern, in turn, assembled *them*.

One of her first tasks was to put the code fragments into an intelligible form by setting up some virtual robots based on Willie 1-9's general pattern, and watching how the fragments affected him in simulations. At a low level, there wasn't much to set him apart—he had all the basic moves. At a higher level, there were skills, some mundane, like walking, others more specialized, and among them some potential oddballs.

At a higher level still were some vague intimations of how Willie fit into the grand plan. That was where the discrepancies between Willie 1-9 and the others were most apparent, though at first it wasn't clear what it meant. Gradually, by trying out one context after another, varying the raw materials, cloning multiple virtual Willies to be his coworkers, a pattern began to emerge. It was not at all what she had expected. There was nothing so clear-cut as a memory of having been visited.

But there *was* evidence of design elements in the skill bank that had no place in their normal repertoire. The robots had apparently been busy for a long time on a task she was beginning to vaguely sketch out. There were indications that the Willies had been making large superconducting electromagnets of a type used in mass drivers. With a little more digging, she might even come up with the operational parameters. Ingenious! The pirates had no need to risk a landing—they had just instructed the robots to construct a mass driver and shoot material off to some rendezvous point. Except for one robot who fell down a crack, there would have been no trace left behind.

She was up on her feet from the excitement, and dying to tell someone. She wondered how they might reconstruct the exact timing and trajectory of the material. Maybe from the record of adjustments to the uplink antenna they could see how the asteroid's orbit had changed. Pacing the room soon became striding down the hallway full of a sudden sympathy for her stranded comrades. This charade had gone on long enough, time to call it off.

The echoes of her footsteps seemed to have echoes of their own. She stopped, and the footsteps continued. She called out, but there was no answer. Then she heard the airlock cycle—the noise was coming from the floor below. She slid down the nearest ladder. But there was no one there. A few empty vacuum suits hung limp and faceless. The external view showed nothing, just the black-against-black of night on an asteroid. But if Rakshasa had gone out, why hadn't he turned on the floods?

She took out her datapad and called up the locator. Rakshasa was out there all right, and being sneaky about it. She felt like an idiot for thinking he'd set off that alarm for her sake. He was *up* to something.

Or he could be perfectly innocent. Just out for a walk. It was his element, after all. She hurried back to her room and suited up, her mind full of imaginary arguments, with Anders, with Rakshasa, with herself, trying so hard to figure out what version of whose story made the most sense that she almost didn't notice where she was until she was in the airlock, trying to focus on going through the drill.

She didn't use the floods either. And she was glad, now, that the captain had removed her transponder. It had all seemed like some stupid game at the time.

She stood at the edge of the open hatch and hesitated. There was a ladder, of course, but ten meters, in this gravity, was nothing. Her mind knew that, but her eyes couldn't see it. They couldn't see much of anything without the floodlights. Even if the ground was really there, it hardly seemed substantial enough to keep her from falling through forever. Like a child playing with magic, she downloaded a virtual landscape in a mesh of faint red grid lines, computer generated on her heads-up display. The robots showed up as moving dots, tagged with their designations. Every outcrop and hunk of machinery was mapped in place.

As long as everything was where it was supposed to be, she shouldn't need her headlamp. She could walk unmarked among the invisible things. She shivered, then stepped off the edge and fell so slowly she had an odd illusion of shrinking.

With of flip of her wrists, a pair of joystick controls popped into her hands, and the tubing of the rocket nozzles deployed from her backpack like a few scraggly ribs of an umbrella. She floated low over the ground like a bubble in a breeze.

At first, she followed Rakshasa's location marker on her display, but then, on a hunch, she took a detour along the rift where Willie 1-9 had fallen. She had a vague idea that she ought to retrieve the robot before Rakshasa could get to it, but that idea proved to be hopeless. The crack, when she knelt down to it, was sealed with murky ice that scattered the light right back in her face.

While she was looking, Rakshasa's voice spoke softly into her ears. "Careful there, don't fall in."

She was so startled that she stood too fast and took an unexpected leap, only to be caught in mid-air and brought gently to the ground as she was spun around to face him. His eyes were scrunched up from the brightness of her headlamp, so she turned it off and his face disappeared, and they stood like shadows behind the neon gridwork of their respective displays.

"You scared the hell out of me," she began. Rakshasa brought his hand to his face in a gesture of silence.

"Privacy," he said, and switched her over to short-range infrared communication.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked, though what she really wondered was how he had covered so much ground so quickly.

"Same as you, I think. Trying to understand what's going on. Come this way. I want to show you something." He guided her to a nearby bit of asteroid, just like any other bit, and said, "Here it is, the missing piece. Impressive, isn't it? When you see it up close."

"See what?"

"Oh, I forgot. We're looking at different realities. Here, download this." Once again he allowed himself a few liberties with her keypad and established a link between their display processors.

Then she could see it, in virtual reality, like the bare spine of some ancient mastodon poking through the ground, but unnaturally straight.

"The mass driver," she said, peering down its length. "Was it really this big?" It was twice her height, and so long she could see the world curve away beneath it while the structure drove straight on like a bridge into nothingness.

"This is just a rough idea, but I think the scale is about right."

It was a simply rendered model, with a stony, moonlit texture that wasn't at all realistic, yet compared to the wire-frame rendering of the rest of the virtual landscape it looked substantial, even ancient. She had to resist an impulse to lean on it. Something fired from the tip as she watched, and fell away like a tear down a well.

"You've even got it all animated and everything." She sighed.

"Something weighs on your mind?"

"Oh, nothing. It's a beauty. I was just kind of . . . doggone it!" She kicked the ground and made a bigger splash than she'd intended.

"You wanted it to be your discovery."

"I was on the right track," she said. "I just wasn't so far along. You got all this from the Willie 1-9 data?"

"Yes."

"And the location? How did you get that?"

"I had to make certain assumptions. More than I can prove. But the point is, once you know what to look for, it won't be hard to corroborate."

"It's a beautiful piece of work. I want to know everything, not just what you figured out, but *how*. I don't think the captain will appreciate it, though. He wanted me to get the reward."

"I didn't think he would, either. I would never have shown this to him, or to anyone but you. The others, I'm afraid, have made up their minds to be true to their convictions. You have a more scientific spirit. I can reason with you."

"What do you mean?" Unexpected flattery had a way of making her suspicious. She glanced back toward the outline of base camp one off in the distance, and then suddenly found the darkness puzzling. In the middle of the night, the whole body of the asteroid would be shielding them from any possible solar flare. So where was everybody? Something in her mind told her to be afraid, but all she could manage was annoyance.

"We're not stupid, you know," she said. "We know all about you and your little character flaw. Tell me if I have this right—Gnomonics created you, so they still have your loyalty, even though Novinco still governs T-sector asteroids. This is industrial sabotage by some faction that was opposed to the merger, and now you want to pin it on Captain Anders so Gnomonics can sue for the loss." She wished she could see his face now.

"There's an interesting thought. Except . . . since those companies have merged, that means they would be suing themselves, doesn't it?"

Damn. "Okay. Right . . . even better. It's the Consortium that has the most to lose. They've been trying to ban the use of ganglies all along. Novinco dropped out of the Consortium in order to merge with Gnomonics, so now, if the ruling comes down on jurisdiction . . . wait a minute, let me think how we fit into this. . . ."

"Not much time left for thinking, I'm afraid. You're on the right track, though. Sometimes the hardest part is to realize when something is missing. It's like what the robots must have gone through. Imagine how they must feel, living, as they do, at the edge of awareness. They live to follow the current trend. Now build a mass driver. Now tear it down and obliterate its traces. And then one day a common thought comes to them, saying, 'Hide from yourself all memory of what you have done.'"

He paused thoughtfully. "That's the hard part, I think. An inference engine of this complexity doesn't quite return to its former state when you erase the bare data. Certain implications are left behind that point to nothing, and their minds keep returning to what, to them, is a discontinuity in the flow of time, and a damaged Willie 1-9 spouting gibberish.

"They just couldn't leave it alone. They *knew* that Willie was the clue. They led us to him. Did you notice the inflated task priority they gave him? They did that on their own, don't ask me how. It was done without the proper authority, yet over the years not a single one of them could bring himself to act on it. Willie's memory might be intact, and they knew it, but they didn't dare retrieve him, and they weren't quite up to piecing together as much from his garbled transmission as we have done." He paused again.

"And what we have done, others can do. There's no way around it—I'm going to have to let you in on a little secret. . . ."

While Rakshasa had been speaking, Trina had felt herself falling under his spell. He had a way of doing that. But not this time. Not any more. "Wait. What do you say we let everybody in on it, shall we?" She reached for her com switch, but he caught her arm. Her mouth popped open in amazement.

"Will you kindly let go of my hand?"

"Trina, hear me out first."

"Aren't you even the least bit worried? It's night, Raki, or did you think I hadn't noticed?" With her free hand she dodged his grasp and flipped her radio back on. "Captain . . ."

She stopped cold. The voice she heard wasn't human, but a stream of robot chatter on a channel normally reserved for people. "Captain Anders, come in! Anybody!"

Rakshasa turned off her radio and caught both her hands. "Let me explain."

"Raki, what's the matter with you? Let go of me! What have you done to them?" She struggled, and they spun off the ground, and as they came down she saw him ignite a hand torch with a tiny blue flame. "Don't! Don't, please!"

It was horrible to watch him methodically cut into her chest plate and burn out her radio circuits. He seemed like an animal getting ready to feed on her.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I just need to buy some time."

"Listen to me, Raki . . ." She felt her feet touch the ground.

"Trina . . ."

"No, listen to me, listen to me, *listen* to me! They're making you do this. This isn't you, it isn't you!"

"Calm down, Trina. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Then let go of me!"

"All right. If you promise to hear me out. There's something you must understand."

"Okay, I promise. And you listen to me. I have something to say."

He released her and she brought her hands up to the wound in her spacesuit and pretended to be fussing with it while trying to unobtrusively flip up the controls of her thruster pack.

"It's what I was saying about the lawsuit," she began as she backed away. "The Consortium—they were right. There are certain thoughts you can't think because of the way you were made. It's true. This isn't what you want to do, it's blind obedience. You've got to believe me."

He saw what she was about to do, but too late. He lunged and missed as she shot up and darted like a frightened bird.

But something was wrong. She couldn't keep to a heading. Her virtual world turned the wrong way, then tilted up and she couldn't bring herself around. As a last resort she threw the control over to autopilot, and still failed to recover. She went into a spin and braced herself for impact—and fell right through the ground.

She took over the controls again. Rakshasa must still have an open link to her visual display, and was using it to tilt her world and disorient her. She shut down the display and tried to make sense of the bare instrument readings when her back struck a surface she couldn't see.

She thought at first she'd hit the ground, but this ground had arms, too many of them. She managed to keep her fists tightly clenched on the controls against Rakshasa's prying fingers, but to no purpose once he severed the control lines. She tried to kick free, then hung like a broken doll as a burst of acceleration made her suddenly heavy.

"I'm not going to hurt you," said Rakshasa. His voice had an uncomfortable presence as he pressed his helmet against the back of hers. "I need you to understand what's at stake here," he continued, "not for my sake, but for the sake of my people."

"I understand, Rakshasa. I understand how you feel about the robots. Nobody blames them, okay? They could only do what they were programmed to do. We didn't realize they were people, but now we do, and I give you my word no harm will come to them."

"No, Trina. *My* people. The tide has turned against us. We are facing extinction."

"What about *my* people? What did you do to them?"

"I'll tell you exactly what I did. I shut them up in the base camp and cut the repeater cable so they couldn't get a signal through. But I did them no real harm. The robot chatter you heard was simply the captain being clever. He's evidently jury-rigged a way to poke through on the com channel, and he's using it to communicate with the robots. They'll have him out soon, rest assured. Which gives us very little time to finish our talk. Okay?"

All of a sudden Trina's sense of buoyancy returned as the acceleration cut off. "Trina, are you all right?"

"You're hurting me." He released his grip on her hands and she brought her arms down across her stomach. His grip was still firm on her upper arms, but if she moved her hand ever so slowly . . . *okay now, on which side did he clip the torch?*

"I'm sorry, Trina. I had no desire to frighten you. For some time now, ever since it dawned on me what took place here, I've been trying to find a way to ask for your help, but I never seemed to be able to bring myself to do it. I kept hoping I would find a way to keep you out of it." He sighed.

"And now what hope can there be? Now, at the worst possible moment, this monstrosity needs your understanding—hopeless unless you reach out and open your mind to me this one last time. Can you try, for old times, sake?"

"Do I have a choice?" She froze, and waited for him to speak before letting her hand resume its wary creeping.

"You have a very important choice to make. But I couldn't let you reveal our discovery to the others till you understand what's happened. Once you were on to the mass driver, you would soon have realized that it launches its material on a trajectory that would be impractical to retrieve except by a fast ship heading out to the Trojan asteroids.

"Do you realize what that means? It's not economical to work the Trojans, not with this belt so much closer to home. And it's a wasteful trajectory to match if all you're going to do is collect the material, then turn around and go home." He sighed again "I don't think they intended to turn around. Who, then, do you suppose would be desperate enough to try to make a living as far out as the orbit of Jupiter, in hiding, and cut off from the rest of humanity?"

He fell silent for a moment, then began to speak again, more slowly. "In hindsight I think I recognize the hand at work here. The people who did this are not pirates, Trina. They are refugees. They are my children. Not literally. But they are the next iteration of ganglyoid. They understand the vested interests stacked up against them. They can see the age-old politics at work, stirring fear and hatred in the masses. Gnomonics will surely be forced to discontinue this troublesome life form in order to fill the terms of a settlement."

His voice had grown resigned and bitter. "We won't have much to say about it. The total of ganglyoid share holdings doesn't amount to much of a vote. We've never even managed to win the right to our own reproduction. We're sterile by design. Gnomonics can pull the plug on us at any time. Our reproduction is a complex process, Gnomonics holds the patents, politics and the legal system will determine our fate. Do you see why a young faction of ganglies might want to break free, simply to survive as a species?"

Trina couldn't bring herself to humor him. "Well, that gives you the right, then. How stupid of us not to see it! Why don't we bring the others in on this? I'm sure, once you explain it to them, they'll realize you have the right to do with us as you please."

"I've been a blundering oaf. I want you to believe that you have nothing to fear, yet by my own actions, my words are suspect. My only hope is that once all the fury has died down, your own inference engine will take over and recompose you. It's a gift you have that you take for granted. There's something about your mind that is more developed than in the others. How can I describe it? If something threatens what you have always believed, you don't take it quite so personally. Inside everyone there is a little ego preoccupied with its own fate from moment to moment, and when threatened, it reacts by distorting reality, as if self-preservation were a matter of remaining unchanged and pretending to be untouched by time. You, I think, can give yourself over more readily to an out-of-ego experience, and forget your own fate for the sake of what in that moment must enter the world through you. It's not a categorical difference, of course, just a matter of degree."

Somehow his words had tangled up her mind again. She roused herself and set her hand in motion. As she touched his side she suddenly twitched down the whole length of her body, surprised by a surge of panic. She couldn't tell if her fear had caused her to twitch, or if lurching at the crucial moment had caused her fear. Her mind fumbled for some words to distract him.

"Yes, well, I guess we'll have to think of something then. To tell the others. Blame it on the robots, do you think?"

"Blame it on me. Just leave out my true motive. Hide all the evidence of the mass driver, and then play dumb. Encourage them to assume a ship landed here. I'll do what I can to lead them away. Tell them I was building a case against them, and I became paranoid about what they would do if they found out. I brought you up here and threatened you and tried to make you talk. Whatever happens to me, you'll be the only one who knows the truth."

Ever so gently, she felt along his belt clip, but found nothing. *Wrong side. Take it easy, just keep him talking.* She set her other hand creeping.

"But they'll want to know who's running you," she said. "Because it might be true, what they say. Maybe you can't help what you were doing. Maybe you should . . ."

"And that would be helpful to us, don't you see, if that's what they believe. That will help me carry the suspicion up the bureaucracy of Gnomonics, and tie them up in hearings. It won't take long for the refugees to get established and make some babies. When they're finally discovered, the shareholders may have tired of the spectacle of corporations at each other's throats, the losses will have been absorbed, and in the softening of time people may wonder what they were so afraid of. What about you, Trina? Do you think someone's running me?"

"You might not even realize it yourself. You might think you're acting of your own free will, but there could be a blindness built into your brain that makes you obey whatever your designers want."

"Precisely why we want the freedom to design ourselves. We did our own investigation into the matter and found that there is indeed such a blindness, of the nature I described, an unwarranted loyalty to whatever preserves the tribal ego. But that limitation, we believe, is not in the uniquely ganglyoid DNA, but in the part we share with the rest of humanity. In the part that is unique, among the enhancements, there is a loosening of the grip of our deeply troubled past, slight and incomplete, but surely worth pursuing, don't you think?"

"Oh certainly. We've been human long enough. Time to move on."

"They're lost without your help, Trina. Hold still!"

"What are you doing?" She made a sudden grab, but came up with empty space. She panicked when she realized he had let go of her and moved away.

"Raki? What are you doing?"

"You'll do the right thing. All you need is some time to think before they get to you."

"Raki! Raki, don't leave me! I've got no thruster control! Raki!"

He was saying something, but his voice was too faded to make out. The IR channel was designed to fade with distance to simulate a normal speaking range, but with her radio circuits burned out it would be useless unless someone came near.

She tried all her com channels again, but calling out with no reply only increased her sense of panic. She was desperate to look behind her, but her view was cut off by the back of her helmet. She thrashed about till she was exhausted, trapped and smothering in a bag with her own heat and heavy breathing. Her heart rate monitor beeped an alarm, condensers whirred to reduce the humidity.

She felt like some stupid, gullible bug. Rakshasa had managed to absorb every bit of her angular momentum and now all her efforts canceled out. How could he do this to her? He must be some kind of fanatic. The way he spoke to her, as if it were all academic, while he strung her up and left her dangling on a wad of pure nothing.

As her useless anger drained away, she became sad that someone like that could just fall apart. Some kind of conceit, that's what it was. The more people treated him with contempt, the more deluded he became. He was probably never capable of true affection, she should have realized. Only now could she see how strangely impersonal was his interest in her, like some amazing, wonderful thing—but then he found a lot of things amazing, from insects adapted to weightlessness to robot algorithms. In his own mind, he must imagine she was up here meditating on the wisdom of his words, grieving for his martyrdom.

Just how crazy *was* he, then? That would be the issue when he went to trial. Assault. Reckless endangerment. Or would it be murder? What was he up to down there? She couldn't help imagining horrible things—everyone dead, except for one madman preaching to his robots.

She curled up into a ball, and still she shivered. It was impossible to tell if she were falling down, heading for impact, or worse, had she reached escape velocity, to fall forever? Assuming the worst, then, her air would go before the heat. CO_2 would build up, she'd be gasping for air, like drowning but more prolonged. At some point, it would be better to crack the suit and get it over with. If it came to that, she could do it. At least she could give herself that one act of mercy, and somehow she found it calming to discover that she could let go so profoundly if she had to.

She began to consider alternatives. It wasn't all hopeless. The others would look for her, and, not finding her, they'd have to look up. If they were still there. If only she could signal.

She held out her gloved hand and aimed her headlight at it. She could see it plainly, but from a distance? What distance? She had no way to tell. She needed something more reflective.

She wanted most of all to turn around. But how could she acquire angular momentum with nothing to push against? Momentum must be conserved. She couldn't violate a law of nature. On the other hand, she wasn't just a lump of matter. There was no way to fix the thrusters, but maybe if she could puncture the tank, the escaping gas . . . but she didn't have a tool for that. Maybe there was something she could throw.

Then two thoughts connected—if she could crack her suit, escaping air should set her turning, and then she'd have to hope she could close up before it was too late. It might work, but it was very dangerous. Where would be the best place to break the seal?

She became still again, alert to the nearness of an idea not quite present to her mind. Then it came to her and she unfolded herself, her legs together and straight while stretching her arms out to her sides like a dancer about to begin.

She picked out a star to be her point of reference. Then she twisted, her arms to the right, her legs to the left. Holding that twist, she brought her arms down against her sides and spread her legs open and untwisted, but this time the balance of moments was reversed, and her resting point had shifted. Not by much. It was hard to tell if she was cheating by the aim of her nose.

She did it again, and this time she was certain. Slowly, she managed to wobble her way around until she could see the asteroid down below, bigger than she'd expected, as wide as her outstretched arms, and there, the floodlights, like a cheerful mini-Pleiades! She thought that she could see movement. In her excitement, she got her procedure backward a few times, but soon she was facing the compound. She turned her headlamp to full intensity and began flashing an SOS. There was no response. "Come on," she said aloud. "Look up! Somebody look up!"

At last, she saw a light moving up to her, and then the captain's voice came through. He seemed to be talking to himself, almost singing, "I know you can't hear me, baby, but you're alive, and that ain't bad. You're gonna be all right. Gonna be all right. Come on and look at me, baby, give me five, give me five, you can do it do it do it, yes you can. . . ."

Then she noticed he was flashing his light at her in chains of five. She flashed back and said, "I read you! I read you!"

"All right! Love the sound of your voice. How's your vital signs?"

"I'm okay. It's all . . . all okay."

"Okay. Keep your light steady on, now. Clear the runway, I'm coming in."

He was up to her within minutes, carefully checking the damage to her suit, taking readings, pausing to respond to people down below. She could hear the others now, second-hand. Her legs made impatient walking movements, then finally, slowly, he guided her down.

Her joy at returning among the living was tempered a bit by the little voices she could hear in the captain's head, indistinct, but clearly excited, the sound of people taking up positions, moving in, then an unmistakable, "We've got him! We've got him!"

"Okay, hold your positions," said the captain. "Try to . . ."

A tiny voice cut in. "He's not responding, captain. He may be unconscious."

"I can see you now, but I can't see him. What's the situation there?"

Trina could see someone as well as they touched down. One crewmate about ten meters away, and another hovering, looking down at something she couldn't see. She tried to make out what they were saying, but while they were talking, Anders was giving her instructions.

"You stay here. Keep low, he may have improvised a weapon. Don't try to get around without your thruster pack. I'll be right back."

"Okay, okay," she said, straining to pick up what the others were telling him. She had no intention of staying behind and losing her com link. She followed carefully, as if the ground might break. Ahead of her, all the commotion had raised a thin haze of dust that magnified every glance and gesture into an interplay of beams and shadows.

Apparently they had Rakshasa pinned down under a tangle of robots that looked oddly like horse-skulls with crab-legs sticking out. The other crew members wielded pipes and torches. By the time Trina caught up, some of the robots had been pulled off and tossed aside to float like dead things in some prehistoric sea. People were cursing. She could see now that the man under the robots had only two arms—it was Fletcher. The haze was visibly thicker below waist level. As the captain got down on his knees and pressed his helmet against Fletcher's he blurred a bit, as if in a fog, and the empty space he left behind filled in slowly with the independent trajectories of random motes.

"All right, tell me slowly, now." The reply had that hollow sound that told Trina she was hearing something coming to the captain through no com channel at all, but purely by conduction through the helmet contact.

"It cut me off, the first robot, it attacked me and cut all my com links and started dragging me. And then the others were all over me, the ones you sent after Rakshasa . . ."

Trina could see what they'd been up to. The first robot, under Rakshasa's control, must have pinned his transponder on this poor guy. The captain spotted her. "I thought I . . ." He stood and came over to her. "We've lost Raki again. I'd sent Fletcher to secure the ship. . . ." He whirled. "The ship!"

The ship was decapitated. Off in the distance, the small speck of the command module was shrinking into the night.

The captain tried to raise it. "Listen to me, Rakshasa, there's nowhere to run. You're just making things worse for yourself."

Connors was trying to raise it, too. "Get back here you chicken-shit bastard freak!" and he hurled a chunk of pipe at it, flipping himself head-over-heels as he did. The pipe twirled hypnotically, so fast and far it seemed that it really could overtake the ship.

Trina yelled, "Don't do this to us! You're killing me, too, Rakshasa! You're killing all of us! Damn you!"

"Okay, easy," said the captain. "Forget him. Nobody's getting killed. Look, we've still got the service module. We've got supplies. Kira, how's the backup antenna?"

"He got that one, too. And the omni."

"Okay, you go check them out and give me a report, how soon to get them back on line. I want the fastest first, even if that's just the omni, and then go to work on the directional. Report to us back at base camp."

He raised his voice. "Listen up, everybody, we're okay till help arrives. We've got liquid oxygen left in the tanks that we can convert to breathable air, and a working volatile processing plant. We can fix that airlock and pressurize the cave in one day. I want to see a line of sherpa robots moving supplies to the cave. This is a habitat, people, we're moving in. Let's go!"

He came over to Trina and guided her by the shoulders. "I'm not going to lose you this time. How do you figure that crazy bastard? You take it easy for now, and then I'm going to want to know what happened out there. Don't worry, there's nowhere he can go. We're going to nail his ass, and then we'll nail whoever's behind him."

Trina kept quiet as she let herself be guided back to the cave. It wasn't hard to pretend to be too exhausted to talk. She just wanted to sleep, and forget, and have nothing to do with the mess Rakshasa had left behind. There was a path of least resistance she could take, that would get her off the hook and shift responsibility to official channels. But some part of her still seemed to be looking down from above.

As if clutching a pain, she brought her hand to the keypad and erased the rendering of the mass driver, and thought of what remained to be done, then felt foolish. What if Rakshasa was as crazy as he seemed?

Then she prayed into the nothingness. *Please let there be refugees. Please be out there. And be good, dammit. Be worth all the trouble, at least.* ○

LINCOLN IN FROGMORE

Andy Duncan

Andy Duncan, a native of Batesburg, South Carolina, lives in Northport, Alabama, with his wife, Sydney, and works in nearby Tuscaloosa as senior editor of a business magazine. His fascination with "outsider art" springs from a traveling exhibit at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, where he first saw the Sam Doyle painting that inspired this story. Recent publications include stories in *Starlight 3* and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Fourteenth Annual Collection* (St. Martin's). His first book, *Beluthahatchie and Other Stories*, was recently published by Golden Gryphon Press.

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From the Federal Writers' Project interview with Shad Alston at his home on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, September 21, 1936. Interviewer: Miss Jordan Matthews.

Younguns these days, they don't want to hear bout no slavery, they don't want to hear bout Mr. Lincoln. And he was just down the road a piece here, in that swamp yonder. I saw him with my own eyes, and they were good eyes then. You'd think it'd all happened to a bunch of strange niggers up in Philly-Me-York, stead of to their own blood kin, their own folks.

I start telling bout Mr. Lincoln coming down here, and what do I get? "You lying like the crossties, Mr. Shad. You lying up a nation." "Shame on you, Mr. Shad. You done quit lying and gone to flying." Huh!

Anybody ain't got sense enough to know what slavery was, won't be able to see it coming back, will they? Be slaves again and not even know it.

Now I'm gone tell you a true thing. I'll tell you bout Mr. Lincoln, just the way it happened, and you can put it in your book. That's how true it is, now: True enough for a book.

"Once upon a time was a good old time,
"Bit by a gator he'd spit turpentine."

That's how we'd start a tale when I was a youngun. I don't rightly know how old I was when it happened, but I was bout *that* high up against the doorframe, and all longleggedy like a granddaddy spider, and fast! I could outrun a coach whip. And you better believe I sure hit it a lick that evening when Maum Hannah called me from the house.

"Shad! You, Shad! You better give it the book back on here to this yard, boy, or I'll be all over you like gravy over rice."

When I heard that, I was in the edge of the woods, holding up a bright green gopher turtle in the air real still-like, to see would it think it was back on the ground, and poke its head outen its shell. But my arm had gone numb on me, and I reckon that gopher woulda outlast me even if Maum Hannah hadn't gone to fussing. I put the gopher back down in the bresh where I got him and beat it on back. Maum Hannah didn't move so quick, you see, and her voice took some working before it got loud enough to carry, so I knew if she was already on the porch and yelling loud enough for me to hear in the woods, she'd done been calling for ten minutes and was hot as a pine knot. Man! Believe me, I hauled the fast mail.

"You, Shad! I swear I'll put the water in your eyes, boy. I'll whip your sorry head to the red."

When I got to the yard she was on the porch, a-sitting on the far end of the joggling-board 'cause she was too heavy for the middle, she'd hit the planks and couldn't get up. She had her pipe in one hand and her walking stick in the other and blue smoke all around. She had her head down to her knees, like she'd wore herself out, but was just opening her mouth to tune up again when I cried, "Here I am, Maum Hannah, I come just as quick as I could."

"Child," she said, "where you been?" She stuck the pipe back in her mouth and sucked on it loud. I was bout to tell her when she went on, "I *know* you ain't been fooling with crawling varmints down in them tick-filled woods that I told you to stay outen."

"No, ma'am, I ain't," I said, sitting down real careful on the far end of the joggling-board, past the reach of her stick. I hadn't figured on her blocking off the truth like that, and leaving me to think up a lie with no notice at all hardly.

"Well, thank the wonder-working God for that," she said, all cast-down and quiet again. Maum Hannah was a big old gal when she was hollering, but when she was done she'd fold back down like all her air was gone, and look small. Lately she was looking smaller and smaller when she was quiet, but maybe I was just getting biggedy. Anyways, I knew she wasn't gone take a lick at me now. I eased on down the board toward the middle, started joggling up and down. Maum Hannah closed her eyes like the joggles was making her tired, but I ask you, what's the good of a joggling-board if you ain't joggling? Might's well have a rocking chair without a rock, a swing with no swang.

"I got to go on a errand this evening," Maum Hannah said, joggling there on the end of the board, her eyes closed, her knobby hands working the end of her stick. "May be I won't get back till dark, may be black dark. You stay here in the house, child, you got me? Not in the yard, *in* the *house*." She thumped the porch with her stick, and our fice dog run out from underneath, carrying something in its mouth, into the bresh. "The roads and the woods are too dangerous these nights, you hear me?"

"Yes, Maum Hannah," I said, straining to see what it was the fice had got.

She was right, too—those were dangerous days, for white or colored, slave or free. Me and Maum Hannah, now, praise Jesus, were free, like a lot of colored folks around the island and in Frogmore town. But that didn't help the poor folks none on Mr. Ravenel's plantation, or all the other plantations up and down the Sea Islands, or all the folks who were owned in the cities and the towns. But it wouldn't be slave times for long, no Lord, even the field niggers knew that. Mr. Lincoln's Navy was just off the coast, a thousand ships in a line from New Orleans to Norfolk, each one in sight of two others, and not even a piragua could sail any supplies through without getting blown to kindling wood. Mr. Lincoln's Navy was just sitting there, but his Army, it was getting the *job* done. They done took Savannah just before Christmas-time, and here it was January, and everybody figured Charleston was next, and there was me and Maum Hannah and all of St. Helena Island a-sitting right in the middle.

I guess that's why everybody was on the move that month. It didn't matter how many of Mr. Ravenel's niggers got whipped or hung, every day more and more of 'em just turned up gone, headed toward Savannah hoping to hook up with the bluecoats, or heading into the woods hoping to hide out till it was all over. The bravest, we'd heard tell, were rafting or swimming out into the Sound, hoping Mr. Lincoln's ships would take 'em aboard and give 'em a medal, I reckon, or leastways a job putting flint to the fuse. And paterollers were combing the country looking to string up or cut to pieces any coloreds they could find, whether they were the ones who'd run off or not—and gator-black wild niggers were living half-starved and crazy in the marsh—and Sesesh deserters, in twos and threes, were trying to get to Charleston by the back roads, or through the woods and swamps—and some said a boatload of drunk bluecoats come ashore some nights, in the fog, bored with sitting in the water and playing coon-can for nickels, and hot for some devilment. Blue can hide in the woods at night as easy as gray, and kill you just as dead.

So it was a wild time, but did I care? I was a youngun and a longleggedy jackrabbit, as I said, and my daddy was sold before I was born and my mama went away when I was little in Master Ravenel's own buckboard, wearing a pink silk dress fit for a white woman, and Maum Hannah was old and moving slow—so I ask you, who was gone stop me? I was in them woods, and in them swamps, ever chance I got, hoping I'd have me an adventure, and see for myself some of the big things a-doing in the world.

"I done fixed your supper," Maum Hannah said, her eyes open now. "It's on the stove for when you want it. Rabbit stew and beaten biscuits and black-eyed peas and gumbo and a crock of bluejohn to wet it with, and don't you push it all down that worthless dog out yonder neither. You need it more'n he does."

"Yes, Maum Hannah," I said, figuring the fice wasn't gone need no supper, the way he was working at something out there in the bresh. "You gone eat when you get back?"

"I done fixed me a bucket," she said. "I'll eat when I'm ready, I figure." She waved for me to come help her stand up. She managed it, leaning on me with one hand and her stick with the other. Didn't seem to me she needed to be going noplace.

"Where'd you say you was bound for, again?" I asked her, thinking I was being clever-like.

"I didn't," she said, "and I ain't gone to.

"Don't you like it, don't you take it,
"Here's my collar, come and shake it."

She swatted my rump. "Hand me my bucket, yonder beside the churn. I got to get on. The day's waning." She teeter-tottered at the top of the steps, fussed with the bonnet knot neath her chin, looked into the sun a-setting. "Yes, Lord," she said. "The long day is waning, and Your great work is nigh on done. Thank you, child," she said. The bucket was covered by a oilcloth, but couldn't a been much in it—it didn't weigh far from empty. She set it on top of her head, said, "Umph, umph, umph," and went off down the steps, blowing pipe smoke ever which way. "I want to hear you slam that front door behind me and lock it before I get outen the yard, you hear me?"

"Yes, Maum Hannah," I said.

This was big doins for *sure* enough sure. She hadn't in the longest time had me lock the front door. Excited now, I turned my back on her and ran to where the big old key hung on a nail above the fireplace. I slid a chair under it, climbed up there, passed the key on the way up, and stood there feeling like a mullet head. I had grown since last time we used that key; I didn't need that chair at all, now. I jumped off, reached up and snagged the key off the nail, done! Maum Hannah had reached the edge of the yard, but she didn't look around as I slammed the front door and locked it, just like I promised I'd do—cept I was outside the door, on the porch, when I done it. Now Maum Hannah was just outen sight, past the first stand of trees, just a little blue streak curling back to show she'd been there. I was set on slipping around behind her, seeing where she was going. But first I was gone see what the fice had hold of.

I tipped across the yard, trying not to mess up the sand I'd just raked that day, and not to make noise that would call Maum Hannah back down on me. "You, dog," I whispered. "What you got there, huh?" It growled at me and shinnied backward in the bresh, but switched its raggedy tail, too, like it wanted to play. "Gone get it," I whispered, on my all fours now. "Yessir. Gone get it. Gone get it. Gone *get*—!" I snatched at the near end of it and the fice jumped all feet up in the air and backwards and held on to the far end as it stretched out between us—a tore-off rag of black cloth, thin so you could see through it, and as long as my arm, or longer, cause it was mighty stretchy. I set to worrying it away from the fice. "Let go, you thin-brainded thing," I said, and he said *rrrr r rrrr,* like a fice does. I stuck a stick between his teeth and he let the rag go to gnaw on that. I held the rag up close and pulled on it and looked through it and rubbed my hands together with it in the middle—man, it was *smooth.* Pretty, too, even raggedy and dirty and full of trash from who knows what all it had been dragged through.

I figured it musta come off somebody's clothes—a shirt or a dress or a pair of britches, maybe—but whoever it was musta been one rich buckra. All the colored folks I knew, and most of the white folks, were poor as owl harkey, and my own shirt and britches felt like croker sacks next to this. The field hands' clothes didn't get soft like this even on washday till they were next to rotten and no good no more. I rubbed the black scrap against my cheek. Betcha my mama is wearing a dress this fine, I thought. Then I stuffed it in the back of my britches so it hung out a little, like a rag I'd blow my nose on, and knelt down to talk to the fice, which was wagging his whole butt end. I didn't need him yapping behind me and bringing Maum Hannah down on us like Moses.

"You, dog, stay put, now," I whispered. "Take care of the place, you hear? No, *stay*." I chunked another stick a far ways beneath the house, and when the fice went after it, I set off down the lane.

Didn't take long to catch Maum Hannah in sight again, and after that I kept to the edge of the woods, picking along and scaring up critters, just in case she looked back round at the road. But what was behind her didn't concern her none, no ma'am. She was focused on the great blue in-front-of, was Maum Hannah that evening as the shadows got long, and she was stepping along right smart, too—for her. There were other people on the road, too. Ahead of her were three younger women, and when they saw Maum Hannah coming they stopped to wait on her to catch up. But she didn't stop in the road to do no bookooing, no, they all set off together, and I was way too far back to hear what they said. Between the trees it was near black dark now, though the sun would still be low on the Sound, and the bird Maum Hannah called the *kambaboli* would be calling in the tide—*Whoot! Whoot!* And the darker it got, the more people seemed to be on the road—way up ahead, and stepping out from the trees all around, like shadows grown legs and gone to walking. And finally I stepped out there in the road, too, cause no way Maum Hannah was gone spot me now, in the dark, and I walked long with everybody else, more and more of 'em all the time.

Some woman nearby said, "We ain't gone be late, is we?"

A man said, "Naw, we be there in good time."

Musta been some shindig indeedy come to pass, get all these colored folks out in the road like this with the paterollers no telling where. Course, we'd be able to hear the paterollers up the road a ways off—*clumpety clumpety clump,* and their shackles and chains all a-jingle.

As I walked along, not studying bout the people just ahead of me or just behind, I kept yanking at the shoulders of my shirt, cause they chafed me. Oh, man, go in the creek, I thought. Quit that. Ain't nothing wrong with your clothes. I knew what Maum Hannah would say. *Always making the big-eye bout what rich people's got. Ain't your shirt clean and fresh patched and don't it fit you good? Them rich people's mouths is cut crossways just like yourn, ain't they? Lord, for truth, you is a backslid and head-pecked child. You ain't thankful for all the things God sent you down, God gone snatch you up. Gone go in your bed and take you out.* I studied on it some, and I decided it was that soft black rag I got hold of, was making my shirt feel bad on me. I didn't think nothing bad bout my shirt before I found that. "Who needs this damn buckra cracker rag anyhow?" I said out loud. "Dog damn it." I yanked it outen my britches, made like to throw it away, then put it back where it was. "Double dog damn it," I said.

Somebody next to me said, "You mighty little to be talking such a way."

He was big and stunk like dispensary liquor, and I didn't want nothing to do with him. But he got right up longside me and said, "Ain't you is Maum

Hannah's Shad?" And then I knew him, too, cause everyone on St. Helena knew old Fuss-X Quall. We called him Fuss-X cause that was the cheapest liquor there was. Even the crackers wouldn't drink nothing cheaper than Two-X, and that only if some straw boss wouldn't buy 'em Three. He grabbed my shoulder and leaned on me while he was walking—like on a crab boat in bumpty water. "You, Shad. You know old Fuss-X, don't you?"

"Yessir, I do," I said, cause Maum Hannah said God wants children to make their manners to their elders, even if that there respectular elder ain't good for nothing but drawing lightning and murdering groceries.

"You don't mind, do you, Shad, if old Fuss-X walks along with you a ways? Old Fuss-X don't want you getting lost in the dark, now, and missing out on these big doins."

"Nossir, I don't mind it, I guess," I said. I wanted to ask him what the big doins was, but I was ashamed to say I didn't know. My stomach went *rrrr r rrrr* like the fice, and I thought bout those good vittles back at the house on the stove, waiting on me. If I had me a bucket now, I could surely make that biscuit *moan*. Too late now. I done aimed high and had to follow it through.

Hold it high, sweep the sky.
Hold it level, kill the devil.

"Yessir, big old doins," Fuss-X said, like to himself. "Bout the biggest doins ever round Frogmore town, I'd say. Wouldn't you say so, Shad?"

"I reckon so, yessir." I wished he'd nail it shut, cause ever time he said something he squeezed my shoulder like he was gone pinch it off, and his breath stank like asafetida root.

"Almighty big doins," Fuss-X said. Then he got down in my ear and whispered:

"You wouldn't lie to old Fuss-X, now, would you, boy?"

"Nossir."

"To poor old Fuss-X, who's had such a hard shake of it, and who ain't so many these days, who can't walk hardly since the paterollers bout killed him alive, who goes to his knees ever night to pray, and who didn't never do you no harm, nor do any harm to any other of Aunt Hagar's children—no, nor the white folks either, no harm to any man, woman, or child in this sin-sick world?"

Somewheres in there his question got away from him and he started crying, the way a stambling old drunk will do, till he couldn't talk no more and blew his nose on his sleeve. I was beginning to think he'd run out of Fuss-X and done filled up instead of home-brewed coon dick, which meant any time now he'd be fighting whatever come near, thinking he was crawling with monkeys. I tried to speed up and get away from him even as I said, sorta desperate-like:

"I wouldn't lie to you, nossir, Mr. Fuss-X, I swear I wouldn't."

"Well, tell me now for the truth, then, Shad boy," he whispered in my ear again. "When we all's get to where it is that we's going this evening . . . uh, where, exactly, is that gone be?"

I stopped in the road so sudden he walked on past me a step or two and nearbouts fell turning around. "Why, Mr. Fuss-X, you mean to tell me *you* don't know where we going, either?"

"I'll tell you *both* where you going," said a big old bald man who come up bout that time, and grabbed hold of me in one hand and Fuss-X in the other. "You both going into one of these trees with your heads knocked together if you can't stay quiet."

The little squawky woman with him said, "You two fools want to bring the paterollers down on us?"

Fuss-X started getting all wet-eyed again and crying bout how he hadn't mean nobody no harm, but I spoke up quick and pitiful: "No, ma'am, but I done mislaid my folks, and I'm scared. Would you mind if I was to walk along with y'all till we get there?" I sidled around, hanging on her skirts, till she was tween me and Fuss-X. "I'll be quiet and good, I swear I will."

So she got all sweet and so nice and said I was the sweetest thing, I was just a doll baby, and how dare you take hold of that child, Cephas, what's got into you?

And she kept on a-petting me and making nice to me as our crowd massed up in the road like there was something in the way. There were a lot of hellos and how-you-beens going on, quiet-like. And then I saw our crowd had run head-smack into an even bigger crowd, a-coming down the road from Frogmore way. And all of us were turning off the road and heading into the cypress swamp down a little narrow track, between a lightning-burnt stump and a honeysuckle thicket.

I knew this way well. It was the track to the praying ground, where the colored folks on that part of St. Helena met to have their Christian worship, far from white men and their devilments. What there is bout a colored church service that so riles up the white trash, I didn't know then and I don't know now, cept maybe they hate to see us going straight to the true Master, you know, and skipping the middleman. Now I'd heard tell that some who worshipped the older ways, the African ways, met at that there praying ground, too, but I don't know bout that. All I know is, there were a powerful lot more people making their way through the swamp that night than I ever saw at Christian service before, and didn't no one seem to be missing a step, either. They's all kind of secrets between neighbors, I guess, even on a tee-ninchy island like this.

When you walk on a track through the swamp like that, the black mud sucks at your feet like it wants to keep you around, squinch squinch squinch, and every step fills with a little water like a spring welling up. Musta been a goodly number of people gone on before, like I said, cause that track was a pure loblolly by now, like a hog wallow. And there wasn't nothing to listen to but the bullfrogs and the zingers in the weeds and the squinch of our feet, cause once we got in the swamp good and proper, didn't no one do any talking. I'd lost track of Maum Hannah and Fuss-X and everybody else. There was just that squawky woman's narrow butt ahead of me, and her man Cephas a-breathing heavy just behind. Fuss-X had had some company at the dispensary that day. We hurried on, one right behind the other, cause it was too narrow a passage to walk otherwise. But when we went over the little plank bridge that meant the praying ground was nigh, I heard somebody up ahead a-talking low. Her voice got louder, meaning she was staying put while we went ahead. It was a high-yaller gal, right pretty, and she was wearing a tight little shake-baby dress, like you don't expect to see at no praying ground—though I now know a man might pray for it, yes indeedy, pardon me, ma'am. She was standing on a cypress knee to get taller, and waving us on ahead, all the while peering back the way we'd come, with a glance now and then into the trees and bogs to each side.

"Take foot in hand, people," she said. "He gone start without you. You think he ain't got business elsewhere? He's a busy man, and no mistake. Come on, now, big man." She put her hand on my shoulder to push me along, and I felt all warm where she'd touched me, but was too young, you know, to know why just yet.

"Don't you be studying bout her," said Mr. Cephas into my ear.

"Don't *you,*" his woman said, looking round. "Step it up, now. We most there."

Just then the path went between two big cypresses, and the woods fell away, and the earth firmed up and started to rise a little, and that was the praying ground. Some said it was where the Indians had scraped up enough dry earth to bury their dead folks, away back centuries before any other color man had lived on this island. Two or three pine-knot torches here and there gave all the light there was, but I could tell there was a mess of people ringing the little hill, a hundred or more of 'em, all shuffling and muttering together, men and women and old folks and a few younguns, too. All of 'em colored people. I wondered how many were free and how many of 'em slave—ain't no way to tell, just by looking, is there? No, not to this day. But some were so ragged and dirty and wild-haired that I figured they weren't just in the swamp for a visit. I stopped studying bout the crowd when I saw that on the little hill that was the middle of the praying ground was a little rickety table holding an oil lamp, and sitting on a chair behind the table, talking to an old woman standing there, was the strangest-looking white man in Christendom.

He musta been nearbouts seven feet tall, from the way his knees was drawn up a-sitting there, and his arms a-waving around looked each as long as that, with hands on the ends the size of hams. He was as shackly built as the table, as skinny as an old swinge cat. His ears stuck out like the fice's, and the hair of his head and beard was as bristly as a hog's, and his eyes was sunk way back in his head like snake holes, and he had the widest mouth I ever saw. He laughed at something said to him, with his head rared back and his pointy knees up against his chest and his arms wrapped around them, and I thought the corners of his mouth gone meet in back and send the top of his head a-rolling into the marsh. You ever seen a chicken get up and run around when its head is gone? Well, I felt like this fella coulda done the same. It was like he wasn't put together solid, like regular folks—they was just stuff stuck on here and there, a beaky nose, a gangly arm, and if any of it was to come unstuck, well, it wouldn't be no crisis, he'd put the pieces in his carpetbag to sort out later. He was dressed all fancy in a black swaller-tail coat like he was ready for the cooling board, and as big as he was, the man he'd got the suit from musta been two sizes bigger. While I stared at him, he stood up—and up, and up—till the Spanish moss tickled his beard, and as he hugged that old woman like a bosom-friend, I saw his left shoulder was higher than the right one, and as he stepped around the table he lurched bout as crazy as old Fuss-X did. A slapped-together mess of a man, he was, and then the old woman turned to step back into the crowd, and Lord God! It was Maum Hannah, a-talking with the man himself like they were old relations. Cause I knew who he was, all right. When his splintery face passed above the oil lamp, I knew him from the illustrateds we put over the walls in winter. Besides, I knew there wasn't but one white man who could draw half of St. Helena to him through the dark barehanded and alone.

He looked toward the spot where we come in, and so I looked too, and I saw that shake-baby gal step into the torchlight a ways, and nod her head. And then I looked back to the mound to see him looking straight at me, and it was to me that he began to talk—yes! Looking straight at me the whole time. That's how come I remember what he said so clear. And *could* he talk, Lord! I believe his tongue was hung in the middle so it flapped both ways. And I didn't stir, nor no one else in the praying ground nor no creeping flying thing in the swamp, nor nothing in the heavens and the earth, while that man said what he had come to say, in a voice that was like the voice in my head when I talk to myself, just that still and true.

"My friends, I thank you for coming out tonight, to harken to a tired old man who ain't got much time. I'll be as quick as I can, cause I know we ain't the only folks abroad this night.

"Now, I'll be frank with you folks, they's some in Washington a little surprised, a little disappointed, too, that once I made my Proclamation, and freed the slaves, that you all didn't take off and go, and tell Mr. Ravenel to pick his own cotton, wash his own clothes, cook his own victuals, and nurse his own babies, and put everything in a grip-sack and swarm up North as thick as cowpeas, throwing off the paterollers like flies off a bull, and leaving the Sesesh with nothing to fight for but taxes and Mr. Calhoun's weevily wig and some turnips a-rotting in the ground. Cause what has slavery give you? Piggin to eat and oyster shell, that's what it give you—you know that better'n me.

"And I admit, I sorta felt this way for a while myself. But Mr. Douglass, he talked some sense into me. He said, first of all, they's some colored folks down here what ain't slaves, whole islands of 'em, sometimes, working and scraping for the money to buy their family free, cause free ain't free and it ain't cheap neither. And next of all, he said that free or slave, this is you all's home, same as Mr. Ravenel's, and who's to say you got to leave it, any, some, or none, just so's you all can be free? And Mr. Douglass asked me, how they gone buy a train ticket, or hire a room to sleep in, if they ain't got nothing but chicken-change? Counting railroad ties ain't a living. And Mr. Douglass also said, it ain't like Mr. Ravenel gone kiss you all goodbye and suit up his best buckboard and curry his best horse and feed you a dinner of chicken-bosom and hang a Joe Moore round your neck and say, Y'all take good care now, and make sure'n send me a pretty postcard when you get to Philly-Me-York!

"And finally Mr. Douglass said to me, even a fly on a bull spills some blood. Whose blood you willing to spill? Yourn? Your mama's? Your baby's?

"And the last thing that Mr. Douglass said to me was, Huh!

"And so I saw that Mr. Douglass was right, that just cause y'all *are* free don't mean you all can *act* free, not yet. Shoot, God thought you were free all along, and that didn't sway Mr. Ravenel none. What's Mr. Lincoln next to God?

"And so I studied it and studied it, and thought it was a pretty bad fix, and I took me a bottle of Five-X over to General Grant's tent—you didn't know the grades went up to Five, did you? Up North they do—and he sipped that good Five-X and sucked on his big cigar and he studied and studied and then he said, Well, Mr. President. If those poor colored folks can't come to freedom, I reckon freedom's just gone have to come to them.

"And so I'm here to tell you, friends, that freedom has *come* to Chattanooga, and freedom has *come* to Atlanta, and freedom has *rolled* down to the batteaus a-bumping the salty docks of Savannah, and freedom gone come *rolling* through St. Helena Island any day now, and that sound you been hearing off to the west ain't no gunshoot, friends, it's the angels of Bethlehem a-shouting hallelujah."

Now through all this, folks been busting out with an Amen here and a Yes, Lord there and a Praise Jesus yonder, and as they give him back that Hallelujah ten times over we all heard a rumbling toward Savannah, like thunder, and everybody went *ooo-o-o-oh,* sorta low.

Now at about that place in his sermon he started to look sorta swimmy to me, and I saw it was cause my eyes were tearing up, and burning. I sneezed a couple times, and wiped my eyes on my sleeve—cause that rag in my pocket seemed too good to use any such a way—and then I noticed the blue smoke a-curling all around my head. Then a hard old clawy hand snatched my shoulder up tight, the fingers wrapping round my long bone like it was a clothes iron, and in my ear Maum Hannah said: "Young coon for running, but old coon for cunning. Boy, you are mine."

"Now, Maum Hannah, now listen, I'll tell you what happened, I—"

"Umph, umph, umph," she said. "I'm gone shake you like a gourd, boy. I'm gone whup you till Shiloh come."

"Shhhh!" someone said, and she hushed, but didn't let up on my poor shoulder none. I was stuck like a pig on a spit, and my only comfort in the world at that moment seemed to be Mr. Lincoln's hard-timey gentle face.

"Now, y'all probably know by now that I have some differences of opinion with Mr. Jefferson Davis. I think Mr. Davis is an American, same as me, same as you all, no worse than any of us and better'n some. But the plain fact of the tragedy is, he just don't accept that honor; if it's Americans that's invited to the party, he says, nossir, I better sit outside in the dirt with my lip poked out, and be all suscautious, cause that party ain't for me. And that's how come me sitting down with Mr. Davis and jabbering with him and breaking out the Four-X ain't gone do any good to get this war over and done with. Mr. Davis was a Senator, you know, before he become a professional Southerner, and a Senator can out-talk any man—can make you think a horse-chesnut is a chestnut horse. And Mr. Davis' egg bag ain't gone rest easy till I'm willing to tell him, all right, Mr. Davis, you win, you ain't an American no more, and now that I think bout it, Mr. Davis, why, I don't rightly know who *is,* if not being an American is as easy as that, as easy as changing your flannels in springtime. And I ain't a-going to tell him that, because friends, I don't believe it. But Mr. Davis don't pay no rabbit-foot to what I believe.

"So Mr. Davis and all those Sesesh that agree with him, they gone have to be made to listen. Y'all ever try to get the attention of a mule? It ain't easy to get, is it? And once you get it, you got to keep on getting it. And that's what General Grant and General Thomas and General Sherman are helping me do. They're helping me get Mr. Sesesh's attention the only way they is to get it—to fret him and fret him, and chew him and choke him, and shoot him when shooting will do any good."

Maum Hannah was one of those who said Amen at this, and she give me a little shake besides, like this was gone be my lot too.

"We got a lot of work yet to do," Mr. Lincoln went on, "yes Lord and no mistake. They's places in this country so parched up the people got nothing left to cry with. Following around ahead of this army, I seen hell, I seen heaven, I seen all kinds of things I never expected to see on this earth. But God never made two mountains without putting a valley in between. And I'm counting on all the good people of Frogmore, every God one, to stand reformed and ready. And General Sherman is counting on you, and General Grant is counting on you, and what's more, your generations here are counting on you, too. So that when you tell your babies, Honey, you were born a *slave,* and you lived through a *civil war,* they'll look up at you and say, Mama, what's that mean? And all your suffering will seem to them like some made-up story, from a country far away. I'm finished and through.

"The saddle and bridle is on the shelf,
"If you want any more you can get it yourself.

"Mr. Cephas, will you lead us in song?"

"Yessir, Mr. President," said the big bald man I had walked to the praying ground with, and he commenced to singing, low but strong:

"Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land,
"Tell old Pharaoh, let my people go!"

And others picked it up and sang along, a-swaying a little, mamas holding their babies, and men holding their women, and Mr. Lincoln not singing but walking around the circle shaking hands with people and hugging them and even kissing some of them. I never seen white and colored kiss before. I seen even old Fuss-X Quall stand up straight to shake Mr. Lincoln's hand, with his other hand a-resting on the ragged lapel of his old tore-up jacket, looking so proper you'd think he was the mayor of Charleston.

"Mr. President, sir," I heard Fuss-X say, "I been drunk since you was elected the *first* time."

Mr. Lincoln laughed and patted Fuss-X on the shoulder and said: "You're an honest man, sir. But you'll need to be a sober man, too, if you're going to be any help to me."

"Yes, sir," Fuss-X said. "For *you,* sir, I'll be that sober man, yes indeedy. Bless you, sir."

"Mr. Sherman burned Atlanta town,
"Let my people go!
"The pillar of fire again come down,
"Let my people go!"

When Mr. Lincoln got round to us, he patted Maum Hannah on the shoulder and looked down at me right kindly and said, "Why, Maum Hannah, who is this here fine young strapping man?"

"Don't you get too close to this one, Mr. Abe. He ain't no bigger'n kindling, but he sparks like the Devil himself. I *told* Shad and *told* him to stay at the home place, but for all the good it done I mights well brought the word of Jesus to a hog. I got to light his shucks a few times fore he's fit to talk to decent folks."

"Oh, now, Maum Hannah, I'm sure he's not as fearsome as all that." Not minding his fine britches, he knelt down closer to where I was, one knee mashing into the soggy grass. He still was a lot taller than me, but he'd evened it up some. He reached out and shook my hand with both hisn—big hairy monkey hands, to look at, but so gentle they held my hand like they was cradling a chick. "I'm sure this boy is here for a reason, same as the rest of us," Mr. Lincoln said.

"Long years to come before the dawn,
"Let my people go!
"Too soon our leader will be gone,
"Let my people go!"

Lots of folks were still singing, but I was starting to think I misremembered the words. I didn't much like the way they were going, neither. But Mr. Lincoln didn't pay the song no mind. "Always obey your elders, Shad," he said. "I always obeyed mine—till I was old enough to stop." He winked and let go my hand. I wanted to say something back, but I just stood there rooted and dumb as a yambo, as he stood and hugged Maum Hannah again, whispering something I couldn't hear. She finally let go my poor achy shoulder. Man! Old Sherman was a caution, but he didn't have nothing on Maum Hannah.

"Old Pharaoh robbed us of our youth,
"Let my people go!
"But the worst robber is old John—"

And right there Cephas stopped singing—stopped, and stood still, eyes staring at nothing, like he was harking to something a ways off. And because he was leading the song, everybody else noticed, and the singing trailed off, and then all the folks was quiet, and listening. I strained and strained, but couldn't hear nothing but the pine knots sputtering, and a little breeze that swayed the moss overhead and made the shadows move funny in the praying ground. I saw that Mr. Lincoln heard it, too, though, whatever it was. His face was a study, like nothing I can line out for you in words. It was the face of a man who sees his death coming, and is ready for it.

Then I heard, away off in the swamp, something like a bridle jingling.

"Paterollers," Cephas said, and not loud neither, but in the next second the pine knots and the oil lamp snuffed out and everybody was in the dark and on the *move*. I could hear the branches cracking and bushes thrashing and reeds snapping and mud plopping as that praying ground emptied out, as fast and as quiet as people could go, in all directions, path or no path, and me and Maum Hannah and Mr. Lincoln in the middle standing stock-still, like the man in a hurricane who hears the water coming and knows there's no place to run. The coal-tip of Maum Hannah's pipe was the only light left that wasn't the moon and the stars. Even the skeeters and the bullfrogs had hushed, so the only sound in the pitch-black praying ground was the picking-up breeze and the jingle, jingle, jingling of bridles, of coffles, of chains.

"Lord have mercy," Maum Hannah said.

"It's me they want," Mr. Lincoln said. "I'm sure of it. They're between us and the Sound, too. You and this child skedaddle, Maum Hannah. Get as far into the swamp as you can, and lie low. I'll make sure they can find me."

"No!" I cried. It was the first thing I had managed to say for the longest time, and it blew out of me like the cork from a jug. Then I was pulling on Mr. Lincoln's sleeve, on his swaller-tails, on his britches leg, on anything I could grab hold of, trying to haul him away from the path we come in on. "Come on, Mr. Lincoln, please sir, you can't let 'em get you, you just *can't,* I'll show you the way, you and Maum Hannah both, I'm in the swamps all the time, Maum Hannah licks me for it but I go there anyways, I know all sorts of paths to the Sound, to Frogmore, anyplace you wants to go, why, I'll lead you to Washington town, but please, Mr. Lincoln! Tell him, Maum Hannah. Don't let the paterollers—or *whoever that is a-coming*—don't let 'em get you! Mr. Lincoln, Maum Hannah, *please!*"

The grownups looked at each other.

"The boy's talking sense," Maum Hannah said. "He knows these swamps, for sure. He's half snake, half possum, half *bobobo* bird. You keep up with him, you might make it to the Sound, sure enough."

"But this child—" Mr. Lincoln started to say.

"Don't talk back to me like I was Congress. You done enough talking for tonight. You said we had to help, now we gone help, and you stuck with it. Now get on, both of you."

"What about you, Maum Hannah?" I asked.

She sucked on her pipe, and the coal flared up a funny color, sorta purple-red, so's I could see a little of her broad, set face, flickering like it was lit from inside, like a gourd at Christmastime. "I got my own ways home," she said. "Old slow ways. Don't study bout me." She took hold of her pipe and stuck her thumb into the bowl and *hist,* the light went out, and out of the dark her voice said: "Get on, now, both of you." And then she just wasn't there no more—it was so pure dark, she coulda been a foot away, and me not known it. But I don't think to this day that she was. Maybe Maum Hannah could tamp herself down the same as the pipe, and wink out like a coal.

"Come on, sir," I said, half-crying but trying not to sound it.

"Wait!" Mr. Lincoln said, and for a second I thought he was gone, too. Next thing I knew a match was struck, and the oil lamp on that rickety table come back alive. He trotted back with something long and pipe-shaped in his hand. "That light'll give 'em something to aim for that ain't us," he said. "Besides, I'd be purely lost for sure, Shad or no Shad, without my hat." He breshed it with his sleeve and settled it on his head as delicate as if he was on the front porch of the big house. I couldn't see the hat too good in that light, but I could see it made him stand up a good deal straighter. He looked bout eight feet tall, and half comical, but only half, and if he got comfort from that hat, well, I got comfort, somehow, from looking at him. "What you waiting on," he asked, "Judgment?" He snapped his fingers. *"Wake up, Jacob, day's a-breaking."*

I grinned and finished it: *"Get your hoecake baking and your shirt tail shaking!* Yes, *sir."* I turned and ran across the praying ground, past the persimmon tree at the far end, and into the swamp, Mr. Lincoln right behind me. He made more noise than me a-going through the bresh, but less than I expected—as much as a buck deer, I guess, when it's running flat out. And ma'am, let me tell you, any deer on St. Helena woulda had a time outrunning us that night.

We splashed through creeks and crawled through brambly places and teeter-walked over logs and scrambled up one side and slid butt-first down the other of mounds plenty larger than the one at the praying ground—and plenty older, too, I reckon—and jumped half-rotted fences and wallowed through bogs and scared the life out of six or seven muskrats, two gators, and a squinch owl, though that old owl bout took it out of us, too, hollering any such a way. We were mosquito-bit, briar-scratched, mud-plastered, and salt-crackly with dried swamp water by the time the water rose up and left us to jump from cypress knee to cypress knee. Then—whoa!—we run out of knees, and there we were, hassling like dogs and draped across a low branch and looking out across the Sound, breathing that sweet rank mud-marsh smell, the tidewater lapping at the knees neath us and something we'd awaked, a moccasin probably, a-plopping into the shallows behind. Do you know that stovepipe hat was still on Mr. Lincoln's head—how, I don't know. The pace we set through that wild country, I was surprised we still had our britches.

"What you reckon we do now?" I asked. I didn't have no idea myself, but I figured, shoot, he's the president, he must be smart. "You got soldiers waiting on you?"

"Not *with* me," he said, and I wasn't sure what that meant. He went on: "My boat's somewheres on this shore. I tied it up under a rotted pier. Beside a grove of palmetto."

"I know that place. Come on." So we thrashed on down the water's edge to the palmetto grove—it wasn't more'n a half-mile south, but felt longer, the way so overgrowed and us so wore-out. There was the skiff, just like he'd said, though if you didn't know to look for it you'd a thought it was just another old plank a-floating there. He clambered around the rotted pilings and eased the skiff on out into the water, and undid the rope and settled down in the stern. Plumb filled the boat up, with his knees nearbouts in his face. The moon come out from behind a cloud then, and I saw for the first time that his hat was bent at a sorry angle, with a long raggedy strip hanging down.

"Your hat's bout done its last do," I said, not wanting to say goodbye but not knowing what else to say neither.

"I know it," he said. "It's a shame." He took it off and looked it over. "I had to lie low in a thicket just after sunset, waiting on a patrol to pass by, and I left a big strip of my hat behind there."

I realized something. I felt around behind, and sure enough, there was that strip of cloth, the one I had wrestled from the fice, still stuck into my pants. I pulled it out and handed it to Mr. Lincoln. "You mean a strip like this right here?"

"Why, that's it exactly. Where'd you find it?"

"In the yard. The dog brought it up. I figured it wasn't none of this island."

"Well, I'll tell you what," he said, handing it back. "You can keep it, and the hat too, with my thanks." He stood, removed the stovepipe all solemn, and handed it over with a little bow, like he was offering me a crown. Nearbouts swamped the boat. "Whoa," he said, settling down again. "Shad, I thank you again most kindly. I got to get back out to my ship, before the sun catches me. Will you be able to get back home all right?"

"Yessir, it ain't far," I said. What I wanted to say was Take me with you, but I didn't say it, and he didn't offer.

"Well, thanks again, and goodbye," Mr. Lincoln said, and commenced to pull on the oars.

I don't know why I asked it. I guess I was just trying to keep him there awhile longer. What I asked, standing straddle-legged on two old pier pilings, was: "Do you like being the president?"

That stopped him, and he laid down the oars in his lap and thought bout it, the skiff drifting sideways, already caught by the current and heading out to sea. When he finally made his answer, his voice got louder as he got farther away. "Shad, I'll tell you like this. There once was a man who'd got powerful unpopular, so unpopular that all his neighbors grabbed him and tarred him and feathered him and run him out of town on a rail. And in the middle of it all, one of the neighbors that tormented him so, asked him, Well sir, how do you like it? And the man said back, Frankly, sir, I'd just as soon walk, if not for the honor of the thing. Goodbye, Shad."

"Goodbye, sir," I said, but he was way out in the Sound by then, a-pulling on the oars, and probably didn't even hear me. Just before he was out of sight, there was a flickering in the sky, and a rumble of thunder, and I heard him say: "God, how I love a storm." And then he was just one more dark patch against the far shore, and then he was gone. Least I never saw him again. So I turned around and dragged myself on back home, got there just as the sun was coming up, and Maum Hannah was a-sitting there –

No. I ain't gone tell it that way. I told you from the start, true enough for a book. I'm gone tell you the part of the story that I don't tell the young folks, and you can spice it or shuck it, same as all else.

I stood there a while, feeling the smart cloth of that poor ragged hat between my fingers, watching and listening—for what, I didn't know. I tried putting on the hat; but it was too big, I couldn't see nothing that way. So I held it in my hands as I turned and stepped off that old pier and onto the muddy ground, and I hadn't gone two paces before I saw a row of little stars about five feet off the ground, twinkling in the air between me and the trees. I stood there and blinked until the shapes around them firmed up some and I saw it was a row of soldiers standing in front of me, the moonlight shining off their buttons and hat-brims and rifle barrels.

I dropped the hat and made a sound like, "Ah," and wet my britches like a baby—the last time *that* ever happened, let me tell you, on that end of my life. But they weren't studying bout me. They were peering off across the water, over my head, looking toward where Mr. Lincoln went. They weren't Sesesh. Their uniforms were too new, their boots too shiny, their voices not Southern but sharp and squawky like chickens.

"Lost him again, God damn him to hell."

"They'll pick him up when he tries to board."

"Stanton will court-martial the lot of us."

"The hell with old fuzz-face Stanton. Secretary of War, my ass. What outfit did *he* ever soldier for, huh?"

They quarreled on like that, I couldn't understand the half of it. I started stepping real slow and careful off to the right, a-walking around 'em. Maybe they hadn't seen me at all, or maybe didn't care. I was just bout to the edge of the old weed-choked road that led off from the pier through the woods, when one of 'em said, all unconcerned-like: "What about the little pickaninny?"

I froze up and nearbouts lost my water again.

"Reckon he'll tell what he saw?"

"I don't reckon he could help it."

"Looks like he stole himself a hat."

"A Southern thief in wartime. And thieving from the Gorilla in Chief, at that. Our duty is clear, gentlemen."

"Hey, pickaninny. Cuffee. Hey, Hercules. How fast can you run, d'you suppose?"

"Faster than a Federal can shoot?"

Then I heard a *snick-snick* sound. And then another one. And then another one.

I'm ashamed to say now that I was too scared to pray even, but if I had prayed for anything, it wouldn't a been for what happened next. I couldn't have imagined such a thing. What happened was a voice from the trees, a new voice but sorta familiar, and praise Jesus a Southern one, too:

"Excuse me just a moment, please, sirs. Hello, sirs? Yankee soldier gentlemen? A moment of your time, if you please."

All the soldiers whirled around away from me and toward poor old Fuss-X Quall, who came strolling out of those black and midnight woods as natural and casual-like as at noon on the main street of Frogmore, one hand fanning skeeters with his hat. The last time I ever saw the man was the only time I'd seen him walk a straight line. Straight toward the rifle barrels a-pointing at him.

"Just one moment," said old Fuss-X—no, *not* old Fuss-X, neither. The man's name was Quall. Just in time, I caught that he was really talking to me. "One moment, sir, is all that I need. A single moment's *opportunity*."

I made use of that moment Mr. Quall gave me. I took off running, straight down that dark road. Behind me the rifles fired. Again. Again. Bullets went *zing* past my head, kicked up dust to my left, splinters to my right. *Zing. Zing.* I ran and cried and ran. Farther and farther behind, the soldiers hollered like dogs. After a while I couldn't cry no more, but I still could run, so I kept on a-doing that. The *zing* in my ears now were skeeters, I reckon, but I ran just the same. I outran any skeeter. I ran out of those woods tiddy umpty, ran home straight as a martin to his gourd.

When I dragged on into the yard just before sunrise, I saw Maum Hannah a-sitting on the joggling board, a-talking to herself, her pipe glowing like a third eye. I tried to call to her, but didn't have no breath. Closer up, I heard who she was talking to.

"When little Shad come down to die, I want you, Master, to be to the head and be to the foot for the last morning. When you see Shad done knock from side to side on Helena, I ask you, Jesus, to be his mother and his father for the last new day. Oh, God! Stand to him as his hair to his head. Take charge of him one more time—on the road, in the field, up to the fireside, oh, God! to the well."

By that time I was at the foot of the steps, and so wore-out that when I tried to climb I just fell a-sprawling in the sand. And then the fice run out from neath the porch to lick my face, and Maum Hannah was plumb all over me, mashing me into her sweat-smelling bosom so I couldn't breathe and hollering –

"Thank you Jesus! Mama! Master! Thank you Jesus! Mama! Master!"

—till the sun come up on St. Helena that day.

I reckon I'm the only one left that heard Mr. Lincoln's talk at the praying ground that night. I was the youngest one there, and now I'm the oldest one here, and the others all done died in between.

Now, hold up there, ma'am, hold up there—don't be starting in on me, pulling out your history-book learning and all such mess as that. I done heard it all. These younguns round here, they take the ferry into Beaufort, they get some free schooling and come back telling me I don't know shit from Shinola bout Lincoln or nothing else. And the Yankee schoolteachers who come out here to take pictures and write everything down, I get it from them, too. Oh, I get it from all sides. People say Lincoln didn't come no further south during the war than Hampton Roads. People say Lincoln wasn't really all that hot to free the slaves nohow, that it was all just politicking for votes and soldiers. People say we coloreds were better off before the war, when the likes of Mr. Ravenel were taking care of us. People say the mockingbirds all fly to hell on Fridays, toting grains of sand to squinch the flames. You ever hear that one? Yes, Lord, people will say just bout anything. That don't mean I have to believe it. What I see with my own eyes, that I believe. And these eyes when they were good saw Lincoln, a lot better than they seeing you now. Maybe they see him again, before too long. Maybe we be needing him again. Yes, ma'am, that's the end of that tale. You know how to end a tale, don't you?

"I stepped on a pin, the pin bent,
"And that's the way the story went." ○

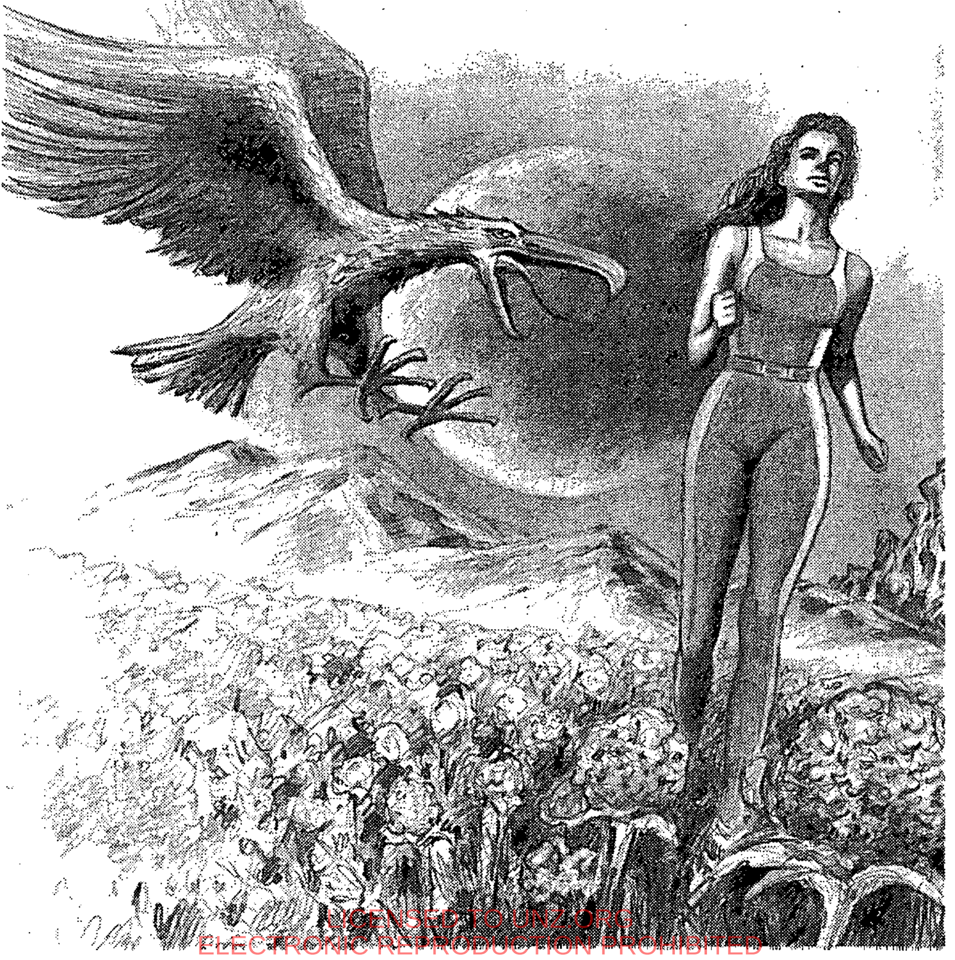
—For Sam Doyle (1906-1985) of St. Helena,
who painted the speech of Lincoln at Frogmore

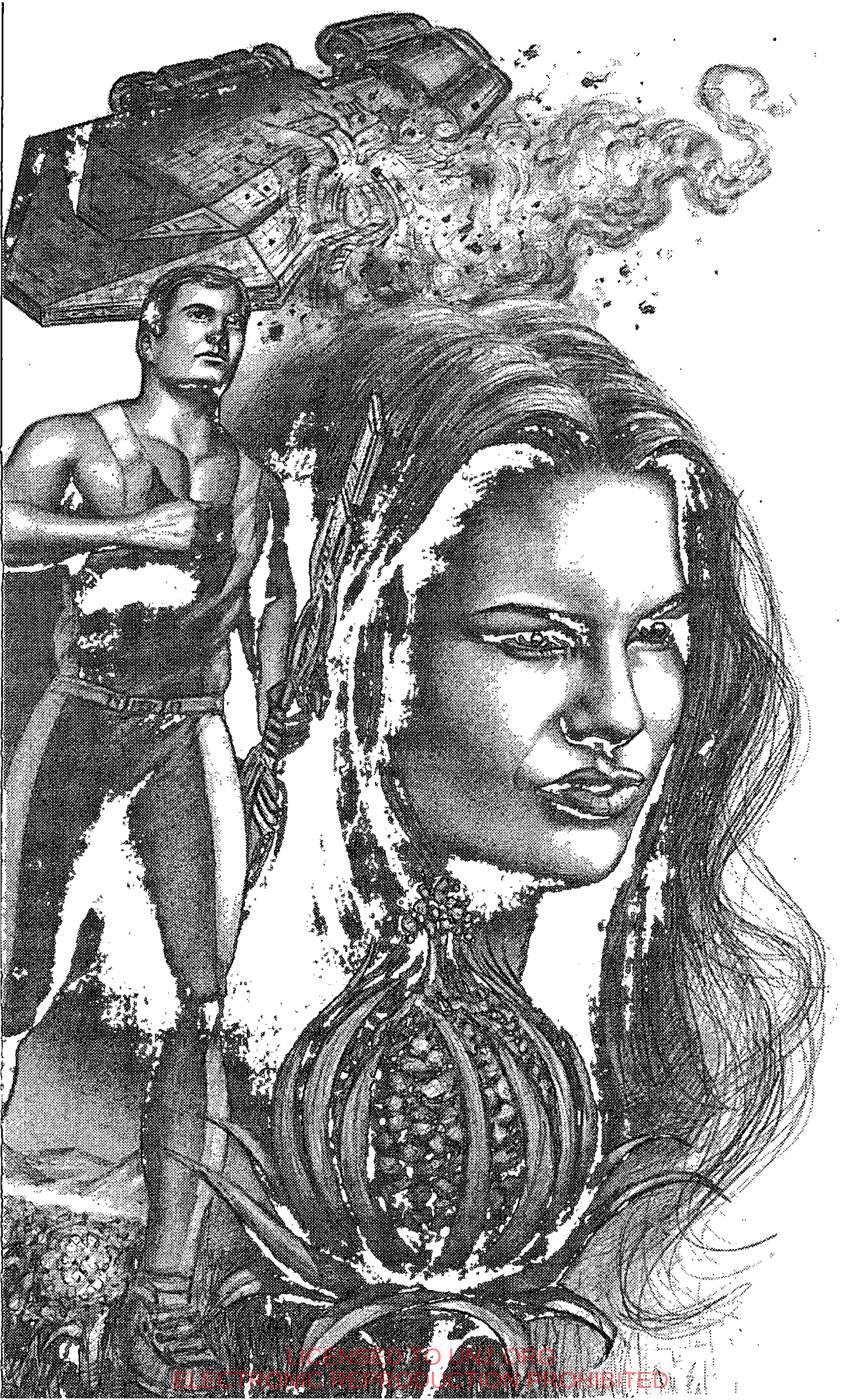
LIBERTY JOURNALS

Allen M. Steele

Illustration by John Stevens

Allen M. Steele's latest story is the fourth in his riveting Coyote adventure series. It follows "Stealing Alabama" (January 2001), "The Days Between" (March 2001), and "Coming to Coyote" (July 2001). Last April, Mr. Steele had an adventure of his own when he testified before the House Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics. He spoke at a hearing on the future of American space exploration.





From the journal of Dr. James Levin: December 24, 2296

Christmas Eve. No reason to celebrate, though. We suffered two casualties today—Jorge & Rita Montero, killed by a boid.

Most of *Alabama*'s cargo and hab modules landed where they were supposed to after they were dropped from orbit, but C4's chute got its lines tangled and came down in a swamp about two miles northeast of Liberty. The module broke apart when it crashed; pieces scattered all over the place, some ending up in a creek and the rest spread out across the marsh. Thank God C4 wasn't a cargo module, or we'd really have a problem, but it was a loss all the same; we were counting on dismantling the hull and interior bulkheads for temporary shelter.

Capt. Lee sent people out to salvage whatever they could find. He hasn't taken any chances; every time a group has left camp, two soldiers have gone with them as escorts. Col. Reese's men have cut the sleeves off their URS uniforms and wear them over their shirts. We've started calling them blueshirts, which they don't seem to mind very much. They're adequate protection against the boids . . . or at least so we'd assumed.

No one had seen a boid close up, but we've spotted them now and then in the distance: huge bird-like creatures, flightless raptors between five and six-and-a-half feet tall, with enormous beaks and long legs—sort of like a cross between an ostrich and a parrot. We hear their cries after dark each night, and every now and then the perimeter system opens fire on them, but they're fast and none had been killed.

Jorge and Rita were in a group of six that went out to the crash site this morning: four civilians and two blueshirts, one of them Reese himself. Carlos wanted to go along—just to get away from camp for a few hours, I think—but Jorge told him to stay behind and babysit Marie. Carlos didn't like it much, but Jorge had been cracking down on him lately, telling him he's got to stop goofing off with Chris and David. Probably a good thing; losing Jorge is bad enough, and I liked Rita as well, but if their boy had been killed it would have been all the more tragic.

After the group arrived at the site, they spread out to search the swamp for wreckage while Reese and Corp. Boone stood guard. Reese told everyone to stay close, not to get out of sight of one another, but it was the middle of the day, and no one had seen any boid tracks on the way out there. Everyone was concentrating on locating more pieces of the module that they could drag back to the colony.

I'm forced to consider the fact that the fault may be my own. Since we've heard the boids only at night and spotted them early in the morning or late in the afternoon, I assumed that they were nocturnal. I told Jorge that just yesterday. As Liberty's resident exobiologist, these people are accepting my judgments at face value. I should know better than to jump to conclusions without more evidence.

Jack Dreyfus and Beth Orr found an intact hull plate stuck upright in shallow water; they couldn't get it out by themselves, so they yelled for help and Boone went over to give them a hand. He was supposed to be watching Jorge and Rita, and Reese couldn't see them from where he was standing. Boone was gone for only a few minutes when everyone heard Rita scream. Reese took off running in that direction, but by then it was all over.

The boid was waiting for them in the tall grass. It killed Jorge first—at least he died quickly, if not without pain—then it went after Rita. It was trying to drag her body into the swamp when Reese got there. Reese says he had to empty a full magazine into the [illegible] thing before it went down for good; even with fifteen rounds in its body, the boid just kept coming at him.

They brought Jorge and Rita back to Liberty, then I followed Reese and Boone back to where they shot the boid. It was already covered with creek crabs, but Reese kicked them off and let me examine the creature. It looks like something from a nightmare—the beak alone is two feet long, with a sharp hook at its end, and since its feathers are the same color as the grass it's perfectly camouflaged.

Blood everywhere, most of it belonging to Jorge and Rita. I went off into the grass and got sick. Then I remembered why I was there, so I made notes and took pictures. Guess there was bound to be something like this: a tiger in the jungle, a wolf in the woods.

They're digging graves for the Monteros now, by torchlight out by the edge of the camp. Sissy's taking care of Carlos and Marie, and Chris and David are with them. Haven't seen Wendy Gunther—she and Carlos are friends, but she lost her father only three days ago, when her dad was killed while helping Capt. Lee close down the *Alabama*. Maybe she's not ready for this yet. Can't blame her. Neither am I.

We've been on Coyote for only four days, and already we've got three orphans on our hands. What the hell are we doing here?

From the diary of Wendy Gunther: December 25, 2296

Today's Christmas. Hip-hip-hooray. I'm miserable.

That's a pretty lousy way to begin a diary. Dr. Okada—she wants me to call her Kuniko now that she's taken me in—suggested I start keeping one. She gave me a spare pad from her supplies, even tied a little bow of surgical tape around it to make it look like a Christmas present. None of the other kids received any presents—nothing to give—so I guess I should be grateful. But Dad's dead, and it's Christmas, and I hate this place.

Could be worse. Carlos and Marie Montero lost both their parents yesterday—killed out in the swamp by a boid. At first we thought it was cute, naming these things after the giant birds in the Prince Rupurt stories, but it's not any more. I guess I should spend more time with Carlos's sister, since he's my friend and all that, but how can I help a little girl when I can hardly stop crying myself?

What were our parents thinking when they brought us here?

Maybe I can understand why Dad did it. After Mom died and he was recruited by the Party to join the Service, I spent seven years in a government youth hostel. When he asked if I wanted to join the expedition, I was only too happy to go along with him. But it never really occurred to me that I was heading to another planet; all I wanted to do was get out of Schaefly. I mean, you can either go into biostasis for 230 years and wake up 46 light-years from Earth, or spend the rest of your life in a dorm with a baseball bat under your blanket in case another counselor tries to rape you. Talk about a tough choice.

But Carlos's folks, and Chris and David's . . . were they out of their minds? From what Carlos tells me, they were all about to be shipped off to Camp Buchanan, where they'd be interned along with all the other "dissident intellectuals"—God, I hate that term—the government was busy rounding up.

But what made them think stealing the *Alabama* was any kind of solution? Yeah, so maybe the borders were sealed and there was the European shipping blockade. People still managed to escape to New England or Pacifica. And most of these guys have no survival training, none at all. Maybe I had it rough at Schaefly, but at least I learned how to pitch a tent and start a camp fire. Until a few days ago, Carlos never spent a night sleeping out in the open, and Marie's scared out of her wits.

I think I know why they did this. It wasn't enough just to escape from the United Republic of America—they wanted to stick it right in their face. The government spent one hundred billion dollars, and completely ruined the economy and sent the bottom one-third of the population to live in shacks, just to erect a monument to itself: the first starship. Dad bought into that crap, but he was a card-carrying member of the Liberty Party, so that figures. But Capt. Lee and the other officers who organized the conspiracy . . . they had a vendetta.

So here we are, the promised land of milk and honey, and we've paid our ticket with four people's lives, including my father's. Now I'm squatting in a tent that leaks when it rains. Haven't bathed in a week, and there's bug bites all over my neck and arms—we call 'em skeeters: they've got huge wings and they hurt like hell when they take a chomp out of you—and tomorrow we've got to start clearing land to raise crops.

Sure doesn't feel much like Christmas.

I hate Coyote. I miss my Dad. I want to go home.

Colony Log: December 29, 2296 (Tom Shapiro, First Officer, URSS Alabama*).*

(1.) Three more acres cleared today for farmland. Controlled fires set five hundred yards NE of town, approx. fifty yards from Sand Creek in order to facilitate irrigation if necessary. Fifteen acres cleared so far, with ten more slated for agricultural use. Soil tests conducted by Dr. Cayle and Dr. Berlant continue to indicate that the ground is suitable for farming. Have put twenty people to work raking the first three acres; others tasked with setting up seed germination trays under guidance of Lew and Carrie Geary. Should be ready to begin planting within a few days if the weather remains dry.

(2.) Nearby woods inspected by ten-man timber crew led by Ensign Dwyer. Two major species of trees identified and named: *blackwood,* which resemble very large bonsai except with a deep root structure much like a cypress, and *faux birch,* a smaller tree closely resembling its namesake in that it has the same sort of flaky bark. Blackwood hard to cut—Paul reports that it took two men almost an hour just to saw through a low branch—but appears suitable for building permanent shelters. Faux birch easier to cut, but its wood is soft, unsuitable for construction purposes; its fallen branches are good as firewood, Paul believes that it may be useful for making paper, furniture, utensils, etc.

Faux birch is plentiful, but Bernie and Lew believe that the blackwood may be old-growth, perhaps hundreds of years old, and have voiced concern that harvesting them may damage the local ecosystem. I've reminded them that our first priority is establishing a self-sufficient colony; tents and prefabs won't get us through winter, and we're already in late summer. If we don't erect warm shelter before the cold weather sets in, then we may pay for our environmental concern with our lives.

(3.) Lt. LeMare surprised Capt. Lee and me by showing us a side-project he's been working on—a Coyote calendar. Apparently he's been doing this on his own initiative ever since *Alabama* entered the 47 Uma system, basing his computations upon local astronomical data. It's not quite finished yet, and it's more complex than an Earth calendar, but Ted claims that it will reliably predict the passage of seasons.

Robert has temporarily relieved Ted from well-digging chore to complete his work; he'd like to have the new calendar ready within the next two days, so that it can replace the old one by Jan. 1, 2297 [Oct. 7, 2300, Earth-time].

(4.) Capt. Lee has placed Carlos and Marie Montero under temporary custody of Lt. Newell. They were staying with the Levin family, who were close friends of Jorge and Rita Montero, but Jim and Sissy already have two sons of their own; even after they moved the Montero tent closer to their own, having to mind three teenage boys and an adolescent girl soon proved impossible. Wendy Gunther remains under custody of Dr. Okada, and they seem happy together, yet Robert agrees that a more permanent solution is needed in regards to caring for our orphaned children.

Once again, we're reminded that *Alabama*'s military command structure is ill-suited for running a civilian colony. We need to devise some form of democratic government, as soon as possible.

From the notes of Lt. Theodore LeMare: Uriel 59, C.Y. 1 (December 30, 2296).

The Coyote calendar is determined by Bear's sidereal year, i.e., the time it takes the primary to complete a full orbit around 47 Ursae Majoris. This takes 1,096 days, with each day approximately 27 hours (Earth standard) in length.

Although Coyote's orbit around Bear is circular, Bear's orbit around 47 Uma is slightly elliptical. Furthermore, Coyote doesn't have an axial tilt. Therefore we can expect an Earth-like seasonal cycle, with both northern and southern hemispheres experiencing the same seasons at the same time. As a result, the Gregorian calendar is useless for accurate timekeeping and predicting the change of seasons.

The Coyote calendar is divided into 12 months, with 10 weeks in each month and 9 days in each week. The months are 91 days long, except for every third month, which is 92 days long; these third months roughly correspond with the end of the seasons, which are approximately 274 days in length.

I've decided to name the months and days after archangels in Gnostic Christian pantheon, with Coyote's months named after the twelve governing angels of Earth's months. Commencing with the new year, the calendar is as follows:

The Winter months are Gabriel (91 days), Barchiel (91 days), and Machidiel (92 days).

The Spring months are Asmodel (91 days), Ambriel (91 days), and Muriel (92 days).

The Summer months are Verchiel (91 days), Hamaliel (91 days), and Uriel (92 days).

The Autumn months are Adnachiel (91 days)), Barbiel (91 days), and Hanael (92 days).

The nine days of the week have likewise been named after the angelic governors of the seven planets in Earth's solar system (according to Aristotle's cosmology). They are, in order: Raphael, Anael, Michael, Zaphael, Kafziel, Sammael, Camael, Zamael, and Orifiel. This is a mouthful, of course, so they could be referred to as Rap, Ann, Mike, Zap, Kit, Sammy, Cam, Zam, and Oz.

The calendar would begin with the year in which humans first landed on Coyote; this would be known as C.Y. 1, or Coyote Year 1 (2300 Earth time; 2296 relativistic time). The date of First Landing would be Ann, Uriel 47, 01 (Dec. 19, 2296 relativistic; Sept. 27, 2300 Earth). The algorithms necessary to convert one calendar to another can be easily entered into a pad; comps may likewise be reprogrammed.

Personal note: I'm not fooling myself—many people won't want to use this, at least not at first. So much of the way we've come to regard the passage of time is based upon the Gregorian calendar that it's become a fundamental part of our consensus reality. If today's date is December 30, then tomorrow is New Year's Eve; time to break out a bottle and sing that German song no one can remember. By my calendar, it's just another Zaphiel (or Zap, maybe Zapday) in the middle of the week sometime in late summer.

The captain is interested, though, so I'll see what he thinks of it. Maybe it'll eventually be called the LaMarean Calendar . . . that would be a hoot!

From the journal of Dr. James Levin: Uriel 63, 01

Still trying to get used to this damn calendar. I know it's more appropriate to use it than the old one, but I still think this is Jan. 2, 2297. Ted's working out the bugs with the program, and once he's done we can install it in our pads, but until then I'm relying on handwritten notes from yesterday's camp meeting.

The new calendar reminds us that we're two-thirds of the way through the last month of summer. We don't have much time left to cultivate sufficient food to get us through winter, and we don't know how much longer it'll be before the first frost sets in. We've already planted the first seven acres; the seeds are bioengineered to produce hardier strains, and we've had a couple of days of rain, so that should help, too. But the nights have been cool, and even in the last week the average daytime temperature has dropped a few degrees. Capt. Lee has directed the construction crew to build a greenhouse ASAP—Dana Monroe says her people may be able to salvage enough glass from the module windows to erect a small one—and he's asked Bernie and me to see if any of the native flora are edible.

We've tested the tall grass (i.e., "sourgrass") that grows in abundance throughout the marshes. Not much nutritional content—probably better for grazing once we get around to decanting the livestock embryos aboard *Alabama* (next summer, probably—too late now, or we'd have to worry about feeding them through winter). Roots may be useful, though; properly fermented, they could be made into something we can drink. Maybe even beer!

Large patches of a round-leafed ground vine (i.e., "cloverweed") infest large parts of the marshy areas. It competes with sourgrass [and] frequently chokes it out. Inedible, but durable and water-resistant. Have recommended it to Dana as a possible source of roofing material.

Ball plants—big mystery. Noticed them the first day I was here, when the *Plymouth* made First Landing: large spherical plants, about 24"–36" in diameter, with a long flower-stalk growing from its center. Fibrous brown leaves form an outer shell almost as tough as tree bark. Grows in small clusters here and there; sometimes you can go a long way without finding another one. Difficult to examine; hornet-like insects (i.e., "psuedowasps') tend to swarm around their flower-stalks, and a couple of kids have already been stung—very painful, and their venom produces a mildly intoxicating effect. David got stung a few days ago and I found him wandering around camp, singing to himself and giggling at everything. Kuniko administered antibiotics and he calmed down; no long-term aftereffects save for a welt on the back of his neck, but we've warned everyone to stay clear.

Sissy found what looked like a dead ball—its petals had wilted and the stalk was half-collapsed, and the shell wasn't as full as the others. No psuedowasps. I crept up close, and when it seemed safe I pulled out my knife and cut into its shell. The plant seemed to deflate a little, and a foul odor escaped, almost enough to make me want to vomit. I pulled aside the husk and looked inside. At first it seemed as if the plant was empty—hollow, like a carved-out pumpkin—but then I saw a small shape at its bottom, wrapped in fine white fibers.

I cut through it and discovered a swamper, i.e., the ferret-like animals that prowl the marshes. Not much larger than rats, they tend to scurry away when we get close. This one was little more a desiccated skeleton; somehow it had been lured into a ball plant, which had then wrapped its fibers around the critter and gained sustenance from its decaying corpse.

Gruesome. Yet I've been observing ball plants for the last couple of days, and noted that swampers tend to give them a wide berth. Indeed, they avoid contact with the balls, even those whose flowertops are in full blossom. And the plants remain shut, with psuedowasps warding off anything that gets close to them. So what lures the swampers inside?

Doesn't make sense . . . or at least by terrestrial standards. Once again, I'm reminded of the fact that I'm dealing with an alien ecosystem. Just when it seems as if I've found something that seems to mimic life on Earth, I find something else that is utterly unfamiliar.

Charles Darwin would have loved this world. Or it would have driven him nuts.

From the diary of Wendy Gunther: Uriel 69, CY 01

Spending most of my time on the farm. Hard work. Calluses on my hands, back sore from all the raking and shoveling. Kuniko bitches about how much sunburn lotion I use and how it can't be replaced once it's gone. Always enjoyed gardening when I was in the hostel, though, and it helps me get my mind off Dad.

Some of the adults think I shouldn't be doing this. Not appropriate for a fourteen-year-old girl to be doing hard labor. Maybe I ought to wear black and cry my eyes out, if that's what they want. But even though I miss Dad, in the last couple of weeks I've come to realize that I really didn't know him all that well. Something I'm just going to have to work out, and that's going to take time.

Being out here also helps me stay away from Carlos. Like him a lot—really, I do!—but he's just lost his rents, and he's taking it a lot harder than I am. Have enough problems dealing with my own loss, don't need the hassle of trying to help him as well. Since he's with the timber crew and Marie helps out in the kitchen tent, I don't see either of them more than a couple of times a day.

Talked about this with Kuniko last night, when we were alone in our tent (Kuni—if you've managed to crack my encryption, *go away!* This isn't for you!). Told her about Carlos; she agrees that now isn't the right time for a boyfriend. Told her he keeps coming over to me at dinner, and she laughed. "There's nothing more pathetic than a thirteen-year-old boy," she said. So true. . . .

(And besides, there's also Chris Levin. Is he cute or what?)

Also been studying the swoops. Never paid much attention to birds back on Earth, but probably because most of what I saw were robins, wrens, etc., hanging around the bird feeders outside the youth hostels I stayed in when Dad was away. Swoops are different; kind of like hawks, but their wings are twice as long, which makes them look sort of like pterodactyls when they're in flight. They come out early in the morning, taking off from their nests in the blackwoods just after dawn, and they spend the day circling the marshes around the colony. Chris's father says they're "riding the thermals," meaning they're kept aloft by warm air rising from the ground. But they're not up there for show. They're hunting, and that's what makes them fascinating.

Yesterday I was out by myself in the fields, using a hoe to break ground, when I spotted a swamper sneak out of the grass about fifteen feet away, near a ball plant I was trying to avoid. It was getting close to the ball, sort of sniffing around its base—which was interesting, since Dr. Levin thinks they stay away from the balls. I stopped what I was doing and stood still, wanting to see if the ball plant would somehow grab the swamper, when a shadow flitted across me. I looked up, and *bam!* out of nowhere, here comes this swoop, diving out of the sky.

Its wings remained folded against its body until the last moment, when it spread them to brake itself. The swamper never saw it coming. The swoop snagged it within its claws—probably killed it instantly—and then it flapped its wings and took off again without ever touching the ground.

Wow! Utterly amazing! I dropped my hoe and watched it sail away, heading for some blackwoods a couple of miles from camp. Wouldn't have traded anything for this sight.

People bitch about how hard it is to live here, and they're right—we're already on limited rations, and we may starve if we don't bring up a decent crop before winter. We've got plenty of tools, but once they're broken or worn out, we'll either have to make new ones or do without. There's boids in the marshes—come to think of it, I was really stupid to be out there all by myself—and any one of us could all die tomorrow.

But you know what? I love this place. Never felt more alive in my life.

I just wish I knew what happened to Dad, because somehow—I don't know why—I don't believe he died the way Capt. Lee says he did.

Minutes of Liberty monthly town meeting: Ana, Adnachiel 2, C.Y. 01; recorded by Tom Shapiro, Acting Secretary

(1.) Meeting called to order at eight P.M. by R.E. Lee, Acting Chairman. Head-count shows eighty-two members present, nineteen absent.

(2.) First order of business was formal introduction and ratification by majority vote of Colony Charter, based upon copies of the draft charter issued to all citizens two weeks earlier.

Mr. Reese went on record to oppose Paragraph 2, which calls for the establishment of a democratically elected government, and Paragraph 3, which annuls all former United Republic Service military ranks. He stated that the colony should continue to operate under military jurisdiction indefinitely, and that all URS officers should be allowed to retain their ranks.

Mr. Shapiro (speaking on behalf of the Charter Committee) countered by stating that an elected government will allow all colonists to have a representative voice in running the colony. The Town Council will be comprised of seven members selected by popular vote, with terms of no longer than one year (Coyote calendar).

Ms. Newell agreed in principle, but stated that she and other URS officers objected to losing their ranks and privileges. Mr. Dreyfus stated that he saw no problem with having URS officers retain their former ranks on an informal basis, but he pointed out that if the purpose of an elected government was to put all members of the colony on an equal basis, formally retaining military rank would mean that "some citizens would be more equal than others."

After an hour of debate, Mr. Lee called for a motion to vote upon the Charter. Motion passed seventy-one to eleven. Mr. Lee then called for a vote to formally ratify the Colony Charter. Vote was fifty-nine in favor, ten opposed, two abstaining.

Colony Charter was thereby passed by majority vote.

(3.) Mr. Lee called for nomination of members of the Town Council. Under Paragraph 5(a) of the Colony Charter, any person above the age of eighteen (before Gregorian calendar 2300, or C.Y. 01) is eligible for election. All candidates must publicly announce their intent to run for office or be nominated by others, and all nominations must be seconded by at least one other adult. Eleven members were nominated for Town Council; ten were seconded.

Mr. Lee then called for formal election of Town Council members. Vote was conducted by show of hands, with Mr. Tinsley and Ms. Geary counting. Elected were: Mr. R.E. Lee, Mr. Tom Shapiro, Ms. Sharon Ullman, Mr. Paul Dwyer, Ms. Celia "Sissy" Levin, Dr. Henry Johnson, Ms. Vonda Cayle.

Mr. Dwyer and Mr. Reese tied in their votes. Mr. Lee called for a second round of voting, in which Mr. Dwyer defeated Mr. Reese by two votes.

Mr. Lee then called for election of Town Council Chairman. Elected was Mr. Lee, with Ms. Cayle as Vice-Chairman.

(4.) Mr. Lee called for nomination of members of the Prefect Office, which would be charged with enforcing Colony Law as passed by the Town Council under Colony Charter. Eight nominations received, seven seconded.

Mr. Lee called for formal election of Prefect Office members. Vote was conducted by show of hands, with Mr. Shapiro and Ms. Cayle counting. Elected were: Mr. Gilbert "Gill" Reese, Mr. Ron Schmidt, Mr. William Boone, Mr. Antonio "Tony" Lucchesi, Mr. John Carruthers, Ms. Kim Newell, Mr. Ellery Balis.

(5.) Mr. Lee requested reports from standing committees.

Mr. Dwyer (Timber Group) reported that his team has finished its assessment of the available timber within three-mile radius of Liberty, and were working to cut nearby stands of blackwood and faux birch. First priority is harvesting enough wood to finish construction of the agricultural greenhouse.

Ms. Jacobs asked when permanent shelters will be built, and Mr. Dwyer responded that work on them will commence once the greenhouse is finished.

Ms. Monroe (Construction Group) noted that, while log cabins can be built well into winter, the greenhouse has to be finished as soon as possible. She also pointed out that her team is presently undermanned and overworked, and requested additional volunteers for the logging crews.

Mr. Geary (Agriculture Group) reported that twenty-five acres have been cleared and planted. However, he voiced concern that harvests may fall below anticipated totals. Cooler weather is not the only problem; swampers have recently discovered the seedlings, and although swoops take out many of those foraging in the farms, the swampers still manage to devour much of the crop. Since no traps have yet been devised, he requested that Prefects patrol the fields and shoot any swampers they see. Mr. Reese agreed to this request for assistance.

(6.) Mr. Lee opened the floor to further business.

Dr. Okada reported that medical supplies are still available, but no longer in large supply. In anticipation of a long winter, she is keeping most of the antibiotics in reserve. She cautioned everyone to avoid contact with psuedowasps, whose sting has a toxic effect, and swampers, whose bite carries a viral infection that leaves the victim with high temperatures, temporary paralysis, and ring-shaped splotches on their skin.

Mr. Shapiro warned people to exercise caution when visiting the outhouses and compost pits after dark. A species of nocturnal animal— "creek cats," faintly resembling Siamese cats but much larger, about the size of border collies—has been spotted lurking around them at night. Although they tend to flee when someone approaches, some of the children have been caught trying to feed them scraps of food.

Ms. Dreyfus asked when school may resume for the colony children. Mr. Lee said that the Town Council will take this into consideration during its first formal session, but also noted that primary education for the younger children may have to wait a couple of months longer. At this time, every hand is needed to get the colony self-sufficient by winter.

The date for the next town meeting was set for Barbiel 3. Meeting adjourned at 11:26 P.M.

From the journal of Dr. James Levin: Adnachiel 38, C.Y. 01

Beth Orr complained about a foul stench coming from the compost pit; she said it smelled like rotting meat. I couldn't imagine anyone throwing away food; we're under tight rations, and everyone cleans their plate at dinnertime. Since Capt. Lee—I still use his rank, but so does everyone—asked me to become the health and sanitation officer, I went to the pit to check it out.

Found a dozen or so creek cats: shot at close range, skinned head to toe. No one else has access to firearms except the Prefects, so I knew where to go.

Gill Reese confirmed that his men have been shooting them late at night. The blueshirts take the swampers they shot the day before and lay them out in the fields, then wait for the cats to come to snag their corpses. Both swampers and cats are inedible—we've tried that already, and their flesh is awful even when cooked—but the Prefects have learned to skin cat hide and cure it. The fur is soft and the skin itself is surprisingly durable; like soft leather, except more flexible and water-resistant. Schmidt has already made a good pair of moccasins from the skin of two cats, and Boone is halfway through sewing together a fur jacket for winter.

It doesn't bother me that they're shooting creek cats for their hide. What disturbs me is that Reese's men would do this without telling anyone. They intended to keep this their own little secret, even though it's something that could help everyone in Liberty.

Reese still wants to be boss, I think. He's going to give us trouble as time goes on.

From the diary of Wendy Gunther: Adnachiel 72, C.Y. 01

Autumn is here. It's no longer as warm as it was earlier this month, and some days have been cold. We had a lot of rain this week, and the winds have shifted, with cool air coming in from the northwest. We've already started wearing sweaters during the day, and at night we've had to bundle up in our parkas.

Mr. Geary says we're probably going to have to pull up the crops pretty soon. We haven't had our first frost yet, but he's afraid that the cold might kill everything if we don't get them out of the ground. The potatoes and carrots are ready to come up, even though they're a little small—I'd like to give them another couple of weeks, but we may not have a chance. The tomatoes were a total loss, though—the cold snap killed all but a few bushels—and even though the corn's ready to be harvested, the stalks are only as tall as I am. Glad we got that greenhouse finished; it may be small, but at least we'll be able to grow food throughout the winter.

Another reason for early harvest: the swoops are beginning to migrate. You'd think Liberty is far enough south that they'd want to winter here, but they seem to have their own ideas. I've seen flocks of them flying southeast, heading in the general direction of the Equatorial River. I'd love to know where they're going, but the orbital photos we download from *Alabama* haven't given us a clue.

Anyway, with the swoops going on vacation, the swampers are running amok in the farm. No natural predators left, winter's coming in—party time for the little monsters. They're eating everything they can find, and they really love the carrots. Dana devised live traps for them—an open-ended box made from old shipping containers, with a small carrot inside; when a swamper goes inside, it trips a lever on the floor and the hatch springs shut—and they're dumb enough to fall for it every time. But they go berserk as soon as they realize they're caught, and the only thing you can do is go find a blueshirt, get him to come over and shoot it. At first I couldn't bear to watch, but I've become used to it. It's cruel, but what can you do?

Yesterday was my fifteenth birthday—or at least it's my birthday back home (Earth, I mean). Still haven't figured out how to convert Gregorian to LeMarean without using my pad, and I don't want to even think how old that makes me back home (15 plus 230 equals no way!!). I didn't mention it to anyone except Kuniko, and I begged her not to tell anyone else, but . . .

Here I am, out on the farm, down on my knees and pulling up cloverweed, when someone comes up behind me. I think it's Mr. Geary checking up on me, so I look over my shoulder and . . . oh, man, it's like half the colony is there. Kuniko, Dr. Levin and his wife, Mr. and Ms. Geary, Ted, Ms. Newell, Col. Reese and a couple of the blueshirts, even Capt. Lee—and of course Chris, David, Barry, and Carlos, who're laughing their butts off at all this—and they start singing "Happy Birthday" while I'm squatting there in the dirt like a dumbass.

They meant well, they really did. But I just wanted to die.

That evening they threw a party for me, at the firepit after dinner was over. First birthday party on Coyote, they said, although I later learned that a couple of the adults had birthdays during the last couple of months; it's not so special once you get older, I guess. They gave me a little cupcake Ms. Geary baked in the community kitchen—chocolate, which always makes me break out, and no candle on it, which can't be helped—and someone opened the next-to-last bottle of champagne, which they let me have a cup of (which I almost spewed; why do grownups make such a big deal about booze?) and Capt. Lee made a short speech, talking about how wonderful I was, how much work I'd done on the farm, etc. And it was really nice, and I had a great time. Didn't know until then that all these people really like me, that I'm not just some poor orphan girl they have to take care of.

But no one mentioned Dad. Not even Capt. Lee. It was like everyone tried to avoid talking about him. Didn't anyone know him? Or is there something else?

The hour got late, and things were getting quiet—Bear was coming up over the horizon, which is usually when people start heading for their tents—and I was tired and ready to crawl into my bag—when Carlos came up to me. I hadn't spoken to him in a couple of weeks, not since he tried to—no, let's forget that part—and I still didn't want to talk to him, but this time he was really sweet. He apologized for what he had done, said he still wanted to be friends, and then he gave me a present. It was wrapped in paper, which we're not supposed to be wasting. I tried not to tear it as I opened it, but when I saw what was inside. . . .

A pair of gloves. Handmade gloves, stitched together from swamper hide, lined with creek cat fur. I thought they were a little large, but then I tried them on and they fit beautifully, comfortable and warm. And I knew, even without asking, that he had made them himself; the stitches are a little ragged, and there's a loose thread at the base of the thumb on the left one which Kuniko had to tie off.

I didn't know what to say, so I tugged him behind the Dreyfus tent, and when we were alone I kissed him. This time it was only a kiss—he didn't do anything with his hands—but it was a really good kiss. He said I tasted like champagne.

I'm still not ready for a boyfriend, but if Chris Levin wants to compete with Carlos, he's going to have to give me a whole damn rug before I'll let him so much as smooch my hand!

Colony Log: Barbiel 05, C.Y. 01 (Tom Shapiro, Secretary, Liberty Town Council)

(1.) Frost on the ground this morning, which didn't melt until an hour after sunrise. Weather station recorded local overnight low of 27° F, with winds from the N-NE at 10-15 MPH. Orbital photos from *Alabama* reveal snowstorms in latitudes above 40° N, with ice forming on the banks of the Northern Equatorial River. Snow also falling in latitudes below 50° S, with ice along river channels within the tundra surrounding the southern glacial region.

(2.) Wildlife rapidly disappearing within New Florida. Swoops continue to migrate to the southeast, and daytime sightings of boids have become less frequent; tracks along the Sand Creek indicate they're heading south, following the creek toward the West River. Although creek cats are still spotted near town, swampers are rarely seen, and it's assumed that they're going into hibernation.

(3.) Monroe suggests that the silo walls should be insulated to prevent spoilage of farm produce by extreme cold. Capt. Lee inspected the silos, decided that this is prudent advice; although the silos were formerly *Alabama*'s cargo modules, cracks caused by entry and landing stress allows cold air to penetrate the hulls. Cloverweed mixed with sand makes good sealing material.

(4.) Principal activity has become erecting permanent shelter. "House-raising parties" held almost every day: twenty-plus people working together to erect a cabin from blackwood logs. Takes approx. two days to build a one-room cabin with a fieldstone fireplace, three to four days to throw up a three-room family house. Eighteen cabins have been built on either side of Main Street, each with their own privies, and land has been set aside for eventual construction of a grange hall.

(5.) *Plymouth* and *Mayflower* have been mothballed. Although onboard nuclear cells still being used to generate electrical power, propellant has been drained from fuel tanks and tents have been lashed together as tarps to protect the fuselages against the weather. Many people favor cannibalizing one of the shuttles for electronic parts and furnishings—we've received requests for passenger couches—but Capt. Lee insists that we keep both craft in flightworthy condition in the event of an emergency. Yet it's doubtful that they'll fly again any time soon.

From the journal of Dr. James Levin: Barbiel 23, C.Y.01

Today, a mystery was solved. Two, in fact—we learned where the swampers have gone, and also the biological function of the ball plants.

In all fairness, I must give credit where credit is due: it was Wendy Gunther who made the discovery, not I. She and Carlos Montero were out in the fields—they say they were gathering corn stalks for roofing material, but I suspect otherwise—when Wendy noticed a family of swampers near the vicinity of a ball plant. Since so few swampers have been sighted lately, this aroused her curiosity, so she and Carlos watched from a discreet distance as the swampers climbed on top of the ball. One at a time, they squirmed through a narrow opening within its leaves until all of them had disappeared from view.

Wendy rushed to my house and told me what she had seen, and I followed her and Carlos back to the plant. The psuedowasps have died off, so there was no risk in approaching it, and the ball hadn't completely sealed, so I gently peeled aside one of the leaves and peered inside.

I counted eight swampers within the plant, curled up against each other, already half-asleep. I let the plant close itself and stepped away, and made

Wendy and Carlos promise not to tell anyone what we had found. I don't want anyone—the blueshirts, namely—poaching the hibernating swampers for fur. For the time being, at least, it's our secret.

My hypothesis: this may be a form of plant-animal symbiosis. The balls provide shelter for the swampers while they hibernate during Coyote's long winter. However, since one or two of the swampers inevitably perish during hibernation—the old and the sick, most likely—their corpses remain within the balls. In spring, the swampers emerge from the ball, leaving their dead behind to provide food for the plants.

There may be certain superficial similarities to life on Earth—the close resemblance between swampers and ferrets, for example—but that's because nature tends to select perfect (i.e., adaptive) designs and duplicate them. Yet Coyote isn't Earth; although it's earth-like, nonetheless it's a entirely different environment—younger, colder, with longer seasons, a less dense atmosphere, and lighter gravity. So there're bound to be significant differences.

One mystery solved . . . yet so many more remain.

In time, through continued observation of this world, we may be able to prove (or disprove) the Gaia hypothesis: that planets aren't mere rocks upon which life evolves by circumstance of nature, but rather self-sustaining lifeforms themselves, their ecosystems sustaining one another in an interlocked pattern of life and death. We came to Coyote in order to escape from political tyranny, but perhaps our future is something greater.

I'm not a religious man—Sissy and I seldom went to temple, and Chris went through bar mitzvah only because his grandparents insisted (David was just shy of his thirteenth birthday when we left)—yet nonetheless I've always considered myself to be a spiritual person. Sitting here within my log cabin, writing by lantern light as a fire crackles within the hearth, my wife and sons asleep within beds we've cobbled together from hab module pallets and discarded shipping containers, I have to wonder if there is a greater power in the universe, and perhaps our role is to understand the complexity of creation.

Winter comes tonight. I can hear sleet skittering against the closed shutters of our windows, the northern wind rushing past our eaves. The hand of God falls upon us. May we be strong enough to endure his fury, and wise enough to understand his mind. O

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HOW TO DETECT A GHOST

The politically correct ones
usually wear T-shirts with the words
Existence Impaired printed in bold
letters across the front.

After arriving home each day,
to your swinging bachelor pad, you find
the television turned on, and tuned
to the History Channel.

Each morning, you find lengthy,
silent messages left on your answering
machine, and you're pretty sure
they're not meant for you.

Things keep disappearing,
then suddenly reappearing, but
hard as you try, you can't seem to keep
track of which ones are which.

Your cat, who used to sleep
at the foot of your bed, now sleeps in the
garage curled up on the hood of your
Volvo—her feline bags packed.

—G.O. Clark

Ménage

Simon Ings

The author has written a TV movie, *Gloria,* four science fiction novels, *Hothead, In the City of the Iron Fish, Hotwire,* and *Headlong,* and a mainstream novel with SF undertones that is set in contemporary London. The paperback edition of *Painkillers* was published in England this spring. Mr. Ings' short fiction publications include stories in *The Third Alternative, Interzone,* and on *Sci-fi.com.* "Ménage" is his first story for *Asimov's.*

A few days after the operation, Frank Wilson—our old producer, Rachel's and mine—got together with me at the studio.

Everything was so swollen and sore and stiff; even my face was a blank, paretic mask. Which was lucky, as there was nothing I especially wanted to express.

Frank scratched his chin, at a loss. The blinds were down over the windows. He crossed the room and started to let in the daylight.

"God, no," I croaked, my voice horribly aged.

He looked around him at the leavings of the operation—the monitors, the plastic curtains, the plastic flowers—everywhere but at me. He was smiling this "better in no time!" smile. I didn't believe it and neither, I think, did he.

Frank's visitations became frequent and regular. God knows, at the best of times his presence was a screeching chalk. But the days when he didn't appear were worse. My eyes weren't focusing properly; I couldn't even read.

All I could do was lie there and imagine.

The nurses were very solicitous. A couple were even pretty.

"You want to toast my recovery one night?" I said.

Giggle. "Ooh, I don't suppose a little champers will hurt. There's some left over from Christmas!"

I said, "I don't mean in here, I mean—when I get out."

"Ooh, I'm not sure my fiancé would like that."

Sigh. "Best go and get it then."

"What?"

"Medicine for my broken heart. Your left-over champagne."

Giggle. "It's only Lambrusco."

I would get better. They promised me that. They insisted upon it. "We know you're going to adjust."

"All right!"

And sure enough, not long after that, I experienced what the scriptwriters on *Green Lanes*, my old show, call "A Sudden And Miraculous Recovery." (The studio has its own short-hand; every noun a writer utters has a just-audible capital letter.)

My face stopped ballooning, my eyes ceased to tear up, and my lids started blinking more or less together; my lips did not crack quite so often and my mouth lost its tell-tale crusts of spittle in the corners. Something inside me, siding with Dorothy Parker, had decided it might as well live.

They advised me on diet, on physiotherapy. They enumerated the medical and psychiatric services to which Frank and I were entitled. Sometimes they were nurses, sometimes civilians. The counselors were the worst.

"These episodes of depression should be expected, cherished, and encouraged."

"Uh-huh."

"Anger is another natural response. It is part of the grieving process."

"Really? Grieving? For what?"

"Well—"

They were too far out of the loop to have been told the truth. They imagined *Green Lanes* had gone against my wishes when it canned my character. (You surely remember Haringay High's wolfish science teacher, Jerome Jones—if not by name, then at very least by the trademark twinkling of his eyes?)

"You must gird yourself for recurring bouts of intense, heart-breaking despair."

"I'll be sure to do that. Thank you, and goodbye."

It was barely five minutes after one of these tête-à-têtes that Frank Wilson appeared, unannounced.

"What is it you want?" I shouted at him, drained of all patience.

He was so hurt—well, I felt bad. It must have been the side-effects of the codeine. I let him stay.

I knew what he was up to. He was working his way around to helping me, of course. He was off on another of his leave-it-to-me, I-know-a-thing-or-two routines. (The qualities that make him a good producer are the very ones that make him an asshole.)

I knew what he had planned for me without him saying it. The last thing I wanted was to watch him play house.

But I might as well have been talking to an empty room. "I knew you'd come around!" Frank chuckled: malevolent as the dwarf in the fairy tale.

That weekend, I left the studio and took a train from Liverpool Street station. Frank appeared at the other end—Audley End, in fact—to drive us home. His car was a surprise: an old Ford Escort cabriolet. Sparkling, sterile, washing-machine white, fat exhaust pipe, Cosworth decal. I was speechless.

But he might as well have saved his money—he drove this monster of a car as though it were a Reliant. I longed for him to floor it.

We did, at least, have the top down. The Indian-summer light was mellowing, and riding under the big sky, drinking in the smell of dust and straw, rich and hoppy as any ale, I smiled—I actually *smiled*, massaging expression into my face with tremulous little tugs of the zygomaticus major—to be out of London at last.

We turned onto a dirt road bordered by hawthorn hedges, the foliage intagliated with dog-rose and fanned with Old Man's Beard. The track was arrow-straight, and went on for about a mile. There were fields either side of us—not the barren industrial sort, but still with remains of hedgerows, and a ripple to the land that broke up the monotony: root vegetables, lettuces, rapeseed.

A tell-tale column of golden dust rose up ahead of us; another vehicle. Even at Frank's cautious speed, we soon caught up. The house was still about a half-mile off and we crawled up to it in the wake of a spluttering tractor laden with bales of straw. I wondered how Frank kept his car so clean, living out here. He must be out every day, I thought. With his squeegee and his bucket. Whistling away.

We came to the house. There were rhododendrons in the front garden. The lawn was new, and sickly. The house, by contrast, was old and big and hunched in on itself. There was honeysuckle over the door. Old roses, with real thorns. Next door to the cottage stood a hideous white concrete shell for a garage, with a row of pine trees meant one day for a screen. There was a lawnmower out, a pair of shears, a fork stuck in the earth with an old tweed jacket draped over it.

I climbed out of the car. I knew that if Frank caught my eye I would have to make some gesture. The idea of congratulating him was grotesque.

We entered the house through the back door.

Rachel was in the kitchen, kneading dough in a large Pyrex bowl. Her arms were dusted in flour up to her elbows. She looked up. She looked at me. There was a streak of flour, like war paint, under her right eye.

I couldn't say anything. I couldn't move.

Rachel's the creator of *Green Lanes*. It was she who dreamt up Jerome Jones: sixth form pin-up, coffee-lounge lizard, extra-curricular cocksman of Haringay High. She made me what I am.

In one sense, the reverse is also true.

The show continues, though she has left. No one quite understands—or forgives—the precipitate way she dropped her career. Her agent spends much of his time sourly declining ever more lucrative offers on her behalf. From *Big Brother* to *Brookside*, they need her magic.

Rachel crossed to the sink and washed the gunk off her fingers. She dried her hands on a tea towel. Her hands were more delicate than I remembered them. Time had made them unfamiliar. They were dry and lined, a consequence, I suppose, of the life she led now: summer days in the garden, evenings spent painting and fitting out her new home. She tucked the towel around the rail of the Aga and spread it out to dry. She picked up a roll of Saran Wrap, tore off a square and pulled it over the bowl, sealing the dough inside. Her hair was more grey now: she had it tied roughly back in a scrunchy, and as usual wisps of it had escaped and hung tantalizingly close to her mouth. It was all I could do not to reach over and brush them back.

"How did it go?" she said. Her face had acquired more lines, especially around her eyes. She looked older, but not yet old. She was becoming that sort of elfin woman whose skull, in the wrong light, rides too close to the skin.

Her lips had not changed, and I wondered, ungallantly, if she had had a collagen injection, they were full and so pink. In some lights, it looked like she was already wearing lipstick. She blinked at me.

I recovered what I could of myself and said, "I have the world's shittiest toothache. Apart from that it's all right."

"What's the matter with your teeth?"

"It's this whole face," I said. "I can't get used . . ." A weariness overtook me. I let my words trail away.

I didn't want to talk to her about these things. This unfamiliar face. This flabby, unconditioned body. I didn't want an easy camaraderie between us. I wanted her hands on my face. I wanted to measure the dryness of her skin against me. I couldn't decide whether the almond smell in the air was her baking or her skin.

But she insisted. She ironed away. She flattened everything.

She claimed she had a new project. "I haven't done anything for this demographic before!" she said.

It was, she said, a Third Age soap, for which they were casting real actors. (Synthespians don't do old age well.)

"That's nice," I said, not knowing whether to believe her or not. Surely I would have heard, if she was developing something new? But if she were lying, or exaggerating—I was afraid to wonder what that said about her.

"The Beeb are very confident," she said. She sounded like a film school graduate. Everybody worth their salt knows the BBC shows blanket enthusiasm about *everything*. They hate rejecting people, preferring to break them down, SS-style, in the rewrite stage. "They're giving it its own channel," she said: she meant a dedicated digital channel, like Channel 4 gave *Green Lanes* before their advertising revenue allowed them to webcast it for free.

Funnily enough, I didn't want to talk about the ratings or her casting problems, or scriptroom politics. Not after all we had been through together: the arguments, the crises, the successes we had shared. (Jerome Jones—for six years running he won us Best Male at the National Soap Awards; during her time at the studio, Rachel picked up an unprecedented three Baftas.) And what about our intimacies? Our rows? Our silences?

She was putting walls of words around herself: barricades of meejaspeak. To keep out the past. I beat against her defenses. "So, you've no plans for that novel you were going to write?"

"No."

"Any news about that company you were going to set up?"

"No."

"What about those short films you were going to do?"

I didn't mean to launch an attack on her. It just happened. "I remember what you used to say about elderly viewers," I said. "Do you?"

Of course she remembered.

Just then, Frank reappeared. "Here we go!" he cheered, plucking a bottle of Crianza from the rack on the dresser.

Rachel beamed at him.

I wasn't ready for that.

I looked away.

Their house was nicer than I'd expected. Something about Frank—so prissy, so precise, so practical—had led me to imagine doilies and dried flowers and horseshoes above the door. Actually, most everything was salvage, there wasn't too much of it, and with every room painted white, the effect was homely, contented, stylish—I liked it.

"Who did the decorating?" I asked Rachel the next day, meaning to pay her a compliment.

"Frank," she said, which showed me how much I knew. "Frank does everything."

He certainly did.

I thought, since they were working so hard on the house, that I'd show willing and do a spot of mowing for them. But Frank got in there before me: "It won't take ten minutes," he announced.

I felt like cooking. "I thought we might go out tonight," Frank said.

"Want a cup of tea?" I said. But it was Frank who made it.

Like most passive-aggressives, Frank was happiest when he was helping people.

"You just put your feet up," he'd say to Rachel, of an evening.

"Just relax.

"Are you comfortable there?"

It pleased him to bear burdens. Give him the chance, he'd suck you dry. Drained of motivation, stripped of healthy self-discipline, you were left feeling progressively more helpless.

"I'll do the washing up," I said.

Without a word, he stacked the dishwasher.

"I'll do the pans, then."

He ran water in and left them to soak.

But in the end it was up to me, wasn't it? If I wanted something to do, why was I sprawled on my ass in front of the TV, waiting for Frank's permission?

I got up.

"Oh, relax," said Rachel. In his company, she was quite as bad as he was.

I fancied a walk.

"Ooh!" Frank seemed very keen. "A walk is just what I need."

I fancied it *now*.

"It won't take me long to get ready," he said.

Half an hour. He couldn't find his boots. Would he need a raincoat? He couldn't decide.

An hour. Now, where were his keys? Should he make a flask of tea? Where was his wallet?—oh, it was in his other jacket. How much daylight was there left?

One and a half hours. He discovered a hole in his boot. But he had others upstairs. There was a lot of cloud to the East. Maybe there was just time for a little toddle down to the pub. Did Rachel want to come. . . ?

I did what I should have done in the first place—I gave up on him.

I went out.

And, of course, it was cold, it was dark.

And, yes, it was raining.

As I walked, I wondered, not for the first time, what the hell I was doing here. Frank felt that my visit was doing me good; that I needed this distraction, now that I was dropped from *Green Lanes*. Rachel's attitude, though—I couldn't figure it. I worried at it constantly, unable to resist the notion that their contentment was not without its exploitable flaws.

Dinner was waiting for me when I got back. Lots of opportunity here for Frank to wring his hands at the amount of time I was taking in the shower, the imminent ruination of the roast and so on: all nonsense. Dinner, then—and some pregnant looks. But acknowledging that I had lost my temper wasn't going to do any of us any good, and nobody said anything.

In the bathroom, as I got ready for bed, I pummeled my cheek, held my face in warm water, rubbed and pummeled it again: but the prickle of the evening's cold was rooted deep in the bone, and for several days after, I could feel ants tunneling beneath the skin.

Every morning, Frank drove Rachel into Cambridge. She rented an office in town—not much more, she said, than a desk, a laptop, a good copier. "It's good to get out of the house. It breaks up the day."

Sometimes they met for lunch. Most evenings, he drove her home; or she would pick up a taxi and arrive around three P.M. She no longer had a car of her own. It seemed an extraordinary sacrifice for her to make—one of Britain's foremost writers for TV, reliant now upon Frank or the national rail system to carry her from studio to location to business meeting. Only—of course—that was not her routine now.

On those afternoons that she came home early, I made the most of my time with her. I tried to tease out the threads of her life, to get her talking about her Third Age soap, even. But she was always tired, and glad to be done with it for the day. Besides, she had the evening meal to prepare. Not "dinner," mind you. Not plain and simple "food." Always "The Evening Meal," capitalized studio-style. Red meat, in the main. Roast vegetables, always. Gravy. Heavy pudding.

At least she let me help. It felt good, to be sharing simple, domestic tasks with her. It felt intimate, though it probably wasn't. It felt like the beginnings of a rapprochement; but after all, maybe it was just safe territory, a place where our differences had no room to express themselves.

"If you peel, I can do the gravy."

Hardly a meeting of minds.

"Can you do us a favor?"

"Yes?"

She was up to her elbows in the dishe water.

"Can you push the hair out of my face?"

I brushed it behind her ear. There was a lot of grey in it.

"Thanks."

I stood away. Her face was lit by greenish sunlight reflected off the dish water. There were lines at the corners of her mouth. She looked inexpressibly sad. I wanted to hold her.

Mornings were the worst. After a night's spooning with Frank, she woke infected with him, leaping out of their bedroom and bouncing about the house like a bumptious squirrel while Frank threw out tendernesses in a ghastly, Disneyesque falsetto, all soft "s'es" and "w's" for "r's."

"The-tea-an-the-toasht?"

They were like Chip and Dale.
"Hooh, *the-tea-an-the-toasht!*"

They kissed constantly. Frank's tongue was prodigious—a pit-bull reaming the marrow from a bone.

Maybe it was purely psychosomatic, maybe the dirty weather—warm, febrile storms drifting in off the Atlantic—but my face began to hurt again, and viciously at night. The only relief I found was to absent myself around nine P.M. If we stayed up talking any later, my eyelids started twitching and a curious, generalized toothache set in that kept me tossing and turning all night.

Even then, I couldn't sleep more than four or five hours before I was awoken by a fierce burning round the corners of my mouth.

I'd wake up at about five AM, and traipse down to the kitchen. It was a nice house to be in: just the right balance of cleanliness and clutter to feel comfortable. I liked it at night: reading, or watching the soaps, or knocking back coffee, or dialing in on the living-room laptop to CNN or Guardian Online—everywhere you sat, the rooms lit you like a film star.

Moving softly so as not to disturb anyone—this was best of all. The truth was, I felt most comfortable as an interloper. It gave me an illusion of control.

I got to watching *Green Lanes* again, and it came home to me—without any rancor or bitterness—what an extraordinary show it was, that I had left.

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week: every soap writer worth their salt has dreamed that impossible dream at one time or another. The dream is as old as theater itself: imagine a drama that preserves Aristotelian unities of time and place by the simple expedient of never pausing, never ending—never, ever, going off the air.

Rachel was the first to turn it into reality.

Detractors say it was simply a matter of time before the dream was realized. That shows like *Big Brother* showed the way—were, in their way, more radical. That it was only ever a question of waiting for the technology to get good enough. But that sells Rachel short. Dramatic, credible twenty-four hour drama is more than a matter of scale: it functions according to a completely different set of dramatic rules—rules no one ever had to figure out, until Rachel threw down the gauntlet with *Green Lanes*.

Colin and Jolene's kids have just discovered that their parents are swingers. It's being played for laughs at the moment, but you can see disaster looming as those impressionable angels prepare for their first term at Haringay High, with all its attendant temptations.

Grahame from the garage is questioning his sexuality. Again.

Sarah Lassiter the nurse and her husband Robert have left for the country hoping that this will give their broken-hearted little foster-daughter A Fresh Start.

With Sarah gone from the hospital, *Green Lanes* is trying out a fresh bevy of night-shift hopefuls. A hospital auxiliary. A disgraced policeman (Clinging Barely To His Badge). An office cleaner with A Dysfunctional And Abusive Marriage. A loner cartoonist.

A loner cartoonist? A definite and dreadful no-no, that one. The scriptwriters should know better than to have allowed it through. Angst-of-creation self indulgence. Dreadful. The punters would flee from it in droves.

Jerome Jones's resignation from Haringay High (he's off—twinkly-eyed cad that he is—to the Roedeanesque "Greatham School for Ladies") has given games teacher Yasmine Grant and love-lorn trades union rep Leonard Rushby "A Second Chance At Happiness." They're Drinking Coffee now; they're digesting their Romantic Candle-Lit Dinner. Robert's lips give their trademark Wry Smirk. Yasmine buries her head in his chest. Robert cups her breast. . . .

I could feel it, still. I could feel it in my hand. Her breast. Her body. Vagaries of plot had driven Yasmine against Jerome—against me—very often. Suspiciously often. You didn't have to be particularly insightful to spot the murky workings of Rachel's conscience. Yasmine was Rachel's way of keeping me sweet.

It was manipulative of her, but flattering nonetheless. To have Yasmine under me. . . . The late-night episodes. . . .

I turned off the TV. The urge to masturbate was strong and dreadful.

Rachel felt uneasy with my early-to-bed, early-to-rise routine. She thought I was avoiding her—that she had done something to offend me.

"Morning!" Rachel greeted me, stumbling down to the kitchen in her cream silk robe. It was meant for a much younger woman, but she wore it well: all wild hair and pale as a Pre-Raphaelite painting.

I went to the back door and pulled on my boots.

"Where're you off to?"

"Thought I'd wander round the wood and back," I said.

"Have you had breakfast?"

"I had some cereal."

"Oh," she said, in a small voice. "Okay." She picked up a smile, and dropped it. "Have a nice time."

More often, Rachel came downstairs to find me already gone. In the hour before dawn, the fresh dampness of everything was intoxicating: a tequila slammer for the lungs.

There were some nearby woods, and a sunken roadway through the center of them, and an old grouse shoot full of dizzying, maze-like paths. Rachel lent me her mountain bike—I don't think she'd ever used it—and I had hours of fun toppling off the thing. One day, after a strong wind had brought down every crab-apple in the county, I tried riding along the sunken road. The apples under my wheels were as hard and smooth and slippery as ball bearings. I clobbered myself bloody all morning and came home grinning like a madman.

But come November, rain made the paths so muddy, even my infantile appetite for filth was satisfied, and I searched out gentler pastimes.

To the east lay an old Second World War aerodrome. Long stretches of broken concrete lay concealed behind shoulder-high grass. It was nothing to speak of in the light of day, but the sheer monotony and scale of it, in the blue hour before dawn, suggested an ancient burial complex.

"Would you like to go there with me?" I asked Rachel once, as I did up my boots.

"Oh, another time perhaps—I'm *exhausted*."

"I can't believe you've never been there."

She shrugged.

Well, I didn't know what to say after that.

"I'd better get on with the Evening Meal," she sighed, and levered herself off the sofa.

"I'll help you." If this was all I could have of her, then I was having it. I wasn't proud. "I can tell you've been working hard," I said, as she bent myopically over the kitchen counter and leafed through her battered Jane Grigson. "You're all hunched up."

"I'll be all right," she said.

"Tell me what we're having and I'll make a start," I said. "You can grab yourself a bath—help you relax."

She smiled to herself.

"What?"

"I thought you were going to offer me a back-rub," she said.

Which gave me something to think about.

She closed the book and put it back on the window sill.

"I can give you a back-rub," I said. "Do you want one?"

"I'm busy," she said.

I stood there, useless, angry.

"Can you get the trout out of the fridge for me?"

I fetched and carried a little while and then I went upstairs to read.

I couldn't even find my place.

I thought about Rachel's hair in the morning, spilling in wild coils round her shoulders and over the cream silk robe. I remembered the feel of her hair as I tucked it behind her ear. I thought about her robe. I remembered seeing it hanging up in the bathroom. I let the book fall shut. A thrill went through me. Appalled at myself, I dropped the book on the floor, got up and went into the bathroom.

There it was. I felt clammy. I touched it. The silk was as cold as cream on my fingers. I gathered it up to my face. It smelled of almonds. I don't know how long I stood there.

I went back to my room and sat on the bed with my book and this time I found my place. I read a page, then I read it again, and then I read it a third time.

My left eyelid was flickering again. If I opened my mouth slowly, my jaw popped.

The back door squeaked open. I listened for voices. I heard nothing distinct.

I went back to the bathroom, realized what I was doing, turned on my heel and came out again immediately, slamming the door savagely shut behind me.

A cheery cry from the kitchen— "Is that you?"

I took a deep breath. "Is it dinner time?" Frank said.

Rachel, after years of studio politics, knew how to keep her cards close to her chest; that was a given. But Frank's behavior was so off-beam, I couldn't figure it at all.

He began crashing us together, almost willing something to happen. He was like a particle physicist, who sends atoms hurtling into each other to find out what they're made of.

For instance, lunchtimes during the week, he took to gathering us in his local pub. He'd carry the drinks over on a tray, nestled in a pile of crisp packets. Honey-roast Ham and Mustard. Country Roast Vegetable and Fish. Whatever. Then one time he didn't show up at all. Which left Rachel and me sipping halves of yeasty real ale in this weird little non-smokers' free-house neither of us particularly liked, surrounded by twee, anal little hand-written notices which said things like *If you have to use your mobile, be prepared to pay the fine!* and *Today is National Table-Sharing Day.*

True, they served great sausages and mash, but even here they made you feel as though you were visiting a slightly malign elderly relative.

Rachel: "De Boers sausages—sounds good."

Publican: "—."

Rachel: "Do you know what's in them, then?"

Publican: "Of course." Sly smile.

Rachel: "I'm sorry, am I missing something here?"

Rachel's mobile rings.

Publican: "Ooh!" —sudden animation— "That's *fifty pee* for charity!"

Rachel was embarrassed, drinking alone with me. Did she understand what Frank was up to?

I tried to talk to her about it, to clear the air, but all she said was: "Oh, let's get out of here."

It wasn't far to the parking lot, but it was starting to rain and bitterly cold. "We made their day in there," I said, thinking of the light in the publican's eyes as he pointed to the charity jar.

But living with Frank had deadened her sense of irony.

She linked arms with me as we entered the parking lot. She was shivering, chilled through. She was wearing her long brown coat—the thin one with the fake-fur collar so realistic that outraged freshmen sometimes threw cigarette butts at it. I put my arms around her. She tucked herself under my chin. Her hair tickled my nose. I bent and dared to kiss the top of her head. She was so cold, she probably didn't even feel it. I ran my hand over her back. Her shoulder-blades were so distinct, so sharp, I could feel them moving under her coat like birds trapped beneath her skin.

I gritted my teeth and my jaw popped, painfully. Gently, I pulled away from her, and tried rubbing the soreness away. We pressed on toward the car.

While Rachel stowed her coat, I studied my face in the rearview, kneading gingerly at the flesh under my jaw. The bristles were thick and sparse against my palm. Frankly, I wasn't at my most alluring. But I went ahead anyway. "I bought you a present," I said, thickly, as she clipped herself in. But Rachel, speaking at the very same instant, didn't hear me. "I'll drop you off at home and pop into Saffron Walden. We're out of milk, and I can get us some *treats* for tonight!"

"I'll come with you," I said.

"You'll catch your death!"

"It's only a shower." Sometimes she could be as bad as he was.

She turned the heater up full-blast. "Keep you warm," she said.

"For God's sake."

We drove in silence.

"Shall we have some music?" she said.

By now, I wasn't sure it was worth it. But he who hesitates is lost. "Let me choose," I said. I fiddled with the buttons on the stereo, making a show of looking through Frank's Napster listing. I knew it was Frank's. It was unmistakable. Everything But the Girl. The Beautiful South. Alanis Morrisette. Texas. Then I took out my present and slipped it into the slot.

"Oh my God." She looked at me. She looked back at the road. "Where did you find this?"

Ella Fitzgerald sings Cole Porter. Buddy Bregman's orchestra. *All Through the Night, Do I Love You, Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye.*

"I haven't heard this in years!"

"Do you want me to change it?"

"God, no!"

I couldn't resist teasing her: "If you prefer, Frank's got a Sheryl Crow I haven't heard—"

"No! Oh please!"

I Love Paris. Miss Otis Regrets.

"Oh, it's so lovely!"

"I thought you'd like it," I said.

"I never get to hear anything decent any more."

"Why not?"

"Vinyl won't fit in the slot."

Saffron Walden was one big Volvo convention. Exhaust plumed in the chilly early-evening air. The disc spun to an end. It was stifling, Rachel had the cabin heat turned too high, so I opened my window. The air was thick with poison.

"Oh, play it again!"

"'Play it again, Sam.'"

"Go on. It brings back memories."

As well it might. Working late at the studio, hammering out this or that twist in old Twinkly Eyes' mercurial character—his sharkish staff-room politics, his never-less-than-scientific after-school experiments—it was all we ever listened to.

Too Darn Hot.

The Waitrose parking lot was a free-for-all. Rachel found the volume button and cranked it all the way up. We lowered the windows and leaned out, grinning madly at everyone until, unnerved, a scowling man in a flat cap, laboriously reversing his Hyundai, let us steal his spot.

"Wait here," she said.

"I'll come in with you."

"No, no, you're nicely dry!" She unclipped the door. Her skirt stretched and rose as she climbed out. She pulled her coat around her and ran for the store. I watched the backs of her knees.

I waited. I checked out the Sheryl Crow. I played some more Ella Fitzgerald. I felt empty. I hadn't bought Ella for the sake of shared memories. I hadn't bought it because I thought Rachel would like it. I had bought it for ammunition. I had bought it to do a job, and now the job was done. I was being as manipulative as Frank, only with me it was worse, because I was conscious of what I was doing. There was a half tube of Werther's Originals in the door pocket. I took one and sucked. My jaw popped and scraped. I soothed it with my hand.

There was a tap on the glass. Rachel was grinning ear to ear. She had bags in both hands. I opened the door for her. I had this nightmare vision of her leaning in and saying: "Look at tonight's *treats*!"

What she said was: "Why don't we listen to some old stuff tonight?"

The room had been her study to start with, only to fill up with clutter when she acquired her office in town. There was so much tat stowed away in there: old furniture, clothes, curtains.

She still had her old hi-fi—the one she'd kept at the studio, to keep her sane through those frequent all-nighters. God knows what was going on inside that thing, but if you as much as stood up, the record player cut out and Radio 4 came on.

"Hold your glass out," she said.

At least Frank knew his wine.

We began sensibly. Ella. Billie. Bird. The Duke. Another bottle.

"Are you hungry?"

". . . ish."

"I'll bring us some stuff from the fridge," she said, and left the room.

There was a table-lamp with an orange shade by the window. I plugged it in, crossed to the door, and snapped off the main light. It was like a brothel suddenly. So much for mood enhancement: I turned the main light back on. Rachel came in with a tray piled high with oatcakes and Styrofoam delicatessen tubs and middle-class cheese. She set it down on the floor by the player.

Radio 4 cut in: some chatter about the "*—problems of combining bookshelves, putting the strain on more than one literary marriage—*"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," she muttered.

I got the record player working again while Rachel laid out a picnic. She turned on the table light, then went to the door and turned off the main light. "That's better," she said. It was like the inside of a seventies porn movie. She stretched out beside me. The orange glow played on her legs.

We ate. We talked, and remembered, and relaxed. Half way through *After Dinner at the Little Club* with Kurt Maier I froze, my hand on Rachel's calf. I was forgetting myself. Rachel sat back on her elbows. The orange table light made her face look even thinner than it was—almost fierce. Gingerly, I began to stroke. She closed her eyes. The needle rose up and the turntable clunked to a stop. I sat up.

"That was nice," she said.

It was Keith Jarrett's *Standards* album that finally knocked us off the rails.

"Oh *God* listen to him!"

Rachel giggled.

Jarrett's so jealous of his music, he ruins even the studio recordings by whining along to the melody. We mewled with him a while, the way we used to, then Rachel had the idea we should go through and find the especially dreadful bits.

"Jesus."

"He's like a cat in a cake tin."

After that, things just got sillier and sillier. Rachel and the *Green Lanes* writers had had a long kitsch phase, around the second year of broadcast, and Rachel had managed to hang on to most of the albums. *Chacksfield Plays Simon & Garfunkel*, *The Ray Conniff Hi-Fi Companion.*

"Oh Christ! Listen to this! *'An improvisation on "Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy"'!"*

"What about this, then?"

"Oh, put it on! Put it on!"

Nina & Frederik: a Danish-Dutch couple who sing Calypso very badly and very, very sincerely. They even do the accents. On the back of the sleeve it said, in big bold letters, "You will have a good time in the company of NINA & FREDERIK."

We did.

"Rachel?"

"Yes?"

"What do you have planned for tomorrow?"

"Nothing," she said. "Why?"

"Why don't you and I have a day out?"

"Where were you thinking?"

"Oh," I said, "I don't know. The beach. Dorset maybe. Cornwall."

She looked at me a long time. "It's quite a way," she said.

"We could go now," I said. "I'll drive. You can sleep in the car."

She laughed.

"I mean it."

"It's not that."

"What then?"

"You've never been to Cornwall," she said.

She misread my expression; she thought I didn't understand. "You've only ever been to the Cornwall we made up," she said. "Only the *Green*—"

She bit her tongue. "I'm sorry," she said.

At least she had the decency to redden.

"I would like to see the real Cornwall," I said, in a small voice.

But she could see that I was angling for pity now, and she wasn't having it. "What about Frank?" she said.

"What about Frank?"

She laughed, and touched my cheek. "We'll have to take him with us."

"Why?"

"How can we *not?*"

And of course, she was right.

Not for the first time, I wondered why Frank had agreed to the operation. Might there not—all his self-sacrifice aside—be an element of cruelty at play?

Rachel made to stand up. But I still had hold of her hand.

"What?"

"Rachel." I tried to kiss her.

She pulled away.

I couldn't work her out. "Isn't this what you. . . ?"

"Of course I want you," she breathed.

I was so overjoyed, I couldn't find the words. When I did find them, she put a finger to my lips. "There's no hurry," she said. "Is there?"

I opened my mouth, slid my lips over her finger.

But she drew it away.

"What?"

"This isn't a game," she said. I looked up.

The desire was gone from her eyes.

I couldn't understand what I'd done to break the mood. "Isn't it?"

"I want it to mean something."

I bit my lip in irritation.

"Jerry?"

"Of course it means something," I said. Second by second, the mood was evaporating. "You and I—we're meant for each other."

"You're a smooth talker, Jerry."

Desire was dead, and now even her sympathy was giving way.

"So?"

She shrugged.

My anger mounted. I said: "If you don't know me by now—"

She laughed. It was a cold sound. "Oh Jerry," she said. "I *do* know you! Through and through! That's the point!"

I felt taunted, childishly hurt. "Meaning? You want *meaning?* You sound like a schoolgirl."

"Of course, you'd know about that," she retorted.

"If only I looked now the way I looked on *Green Lanes*. . . ."

She gave a yell of triumph, as though I had given myself away. "How you *look*?" she said. "This has nothing to do with how you *look*."

"I hate his face," I said. "It hurts."

She pulled away from me.

"I don't know how you bear his smell," I said. I couldn't help myself.

"Come back," I said.

But she was already out of reach.

"I'm sorry," I said—but only to bring her back. She wasn't fooled.

"We'd better clean that carpet," she said, opening the door. "Before the wine stains."

I woke with enough of a hangover that I missed my morning walk. It was an odd headache—there was more to it than just dehydration. There was a pressure. A high keening in the inner ear. A rhythmical concussion. It was the kind of headache that makes cows take shelter under trees. The kind that maddens dogs, and sours milk. The kind that presages a storm.

I looked out of the window.

Well, I thought, so much for my grasp of country lore.

All around the horizon, a band of wet, pale-yellow light separated the sky from the land, promising a fresh morning and a clear day. The sky was cloudless. Frank's cabriolet shone like a fairy-tale carriage.

I went to the bathroom and found a bottle of codeine and swallowed a couple.

I came down in time for breakfast: Bacon, eggs, bread, thirty-seven varieties of highbrow jam. "Passion-fruit, banana, and butter spread?"

"Try some," Rachel told me.

"Jesus Christ."

I sensed Frank reaching under the table to take Rachel's hand.

"Rachel," I said, pushing my plate away, "Do you want to take a walk with me?"

"No," she said.

"No?"

"I've got things to do."

Dead silence as I tied up my boots. I took my waterproof from the back of the door and bundled it up in my hand. I opened the back door.

"See you, then," Rachel said, in the smallest of small voices. It made me wonder if Frank had had words with her about the night before.

I walked in the direction of the aerodrome. Usually I biked it, but the way I was feeling, I'd only do something stupid and crack my skull open. As it was, I kept forgetting to move in for the oncoming cars.

I was spoiling for something. The truth was, I wanted to hurt Frank. I wanted to hurt him very much. Feeling as jealous of him as I did, and so angry at his complacent game-playing, I'd have happily hurt myself, just to hurt him.

At last, straight ahead of me, like a promise faithfully if tardily kept, a thunderhead bloomed on the horizon. It was a dirty brown-black color: a cloud made of old blood. The beating began again, and the pain in my head was that tiny bit sharper now. It helped, knowing that Frank felt it too.

Still I walked. I walked straight into that storm. I welcomed it: the perfect day fractured, the pretense at an end. I had to do something to end this ménage. I knew what I had to do, and I knew it meant my deletion. Right then, it did not seem too big a price to pay.

True, I'd been canned, my character superseded by another. But my code was still valuable, still worth preserving. It wasn't as if there weren't copies of me.

"Frank," I said.

"Frank!"

But Frank wouldn't come.

"Frank!"

Frank, who had let me in. Frank, who let me share. Frank, who only ever wanted to help, to fix.

"Frank!"

Nothing happened. He did not appear. He left me in charge. He left me alone in this body of his, this flabby white flesh. In charge of this face that I couldn't quite work, could never quite fit, and that pained me so much, like an ill-fitting mask.

Lightning flickered at the corner of my eye, like sunlight on chrome. The thunder came a good ten seconds later, and so faint, it might have been playing counterpoint to the beating in my brain. I looked for the thunderhead—my heart stuck in my throat.

It had risen to an impossible height. It impended, a distorted mushroom, lobed at the front like a brain, and as wrinkled. It rose over the hedge as I walked up the hill to meet it. We moved toward each other.

Ten minutes, I said to myself.

Ten minutes more and I'll be at the aerodrome. Ten minutes and I'll be in a place that might have been ours, Rachel's and mine, and a new beginning: *Rachel, do you want to take a walk with me?*

Suddenly the unfairness of it all—the ménage, what it had seemed to promise, and what it had actually become—turned liquid and rose up in me and I was crying so hard, I couldn't walk any further. Had I wanted so much? Were my expectations so unreasonable? All I had wanted was to be cradled awhile, now that *Green Lanes* was gone. I had thought that a modest existence, even a fractional one, was better than nothing. That half-life was better than no life at all. So I had accepted Frank's proposal, thinking perhaps to renew my friendship with the woman I'd been conceived by, and learned from, and worked for, and—yes—loved. (Do not fall foul of the common prejudice. Do not suppose that actors, being merely what they are, are incapable of love.)

And if, these last few days, I had overreached myself—if I had come to imagine that I might wrest her from him—what of it? What could I possibly do, poor, contingent thing that I was, a mere ghost in Frank's machine?

Now Frank—oh-so-helpful fixer Frank—would not even answer when I called.

"Frank!"

He would not even release me.

I had wanted a little after-life. What Frank had given me was hell.

I stood there like an idiot in the middle of the road, while the tears ran down my face. I stood there, waiting for the rain to come and wash my tears away.

But the rain did not come. The thunderhead receded, buffeted by a new weather front. Bank after bank of heavy blue-black cloud puffed up against the invisible assault. The whole sky turned black, as though the air, battling with itself, were growing bruised and broken. I had no more tears left to shed. Weary, wet-faced—disgusted, now, to find myself enmeshed in his flesh—I turned Frank's body back toward home.

I made it back mere seconds before the clouds broke at last, and now the rain came down in solid sheets. It took only a couple of minutes, and the track was beaten to a muddy slough. I stood watching from the kitchen window, laughing with relief.

"The farmers'll love that," Rachel sighed, taking her place beside me.

The alarm of Frank's precious Cosworth had gone off. It was blinking and whining but you could barely hear it over the beating of the rain.

"Look at it! Just look at it!" I cheered.

I was at the end of my tether.

Rachel made a Béarnaise to go with the steak. Frank showed up then, finally. Maybe that was all he was interested in—food. Maybe that was how I should free myself. Maybe I should walk him to the pub, buy a dinner, and then just sit there, with the smell of the gravy assailing my nostrils. Refusing to let him eat, until at last he let me go.

"What do you reckon?" she asked me, brightly.

"Not bad," I said, fatuous and brutal. "Eggs, isn't it?"

The rain drummed steadily against the kitchen window. Distant lightning fractured the sky.

Afterward we went into the lounge with a fresh bottle and watched the news, or tried to, but rain lashed the windows so hard they were rattling in their frames, and all the electrical activity was making the picture fizz and spool.

"... *devaluation* ..."

The storm was so violent, the thunderclaps so close now, that Frank kept pumping up the volume of the little set until its plastic housing buzzed, distorting everything.

"... *resign* ..."

"I just wanted to say thank you," I said. Because of course, there was an easier way to bring this ménage to an end. A more direct, more honest way. And that was to tell Rachel how I was feeling.

It came out all wrong, of course.

"A wonderful rest.

"Really kind.

"Fantastic Béarnaise.

"So good of you."

There really was no point spinning this out any longer.

"—Get out of your hair."

Rachel put her wine glass down on the coffee table. She missed the edge of it and it fell and rolled under her seat, the wine making a neat lunar crescent on the creamy carpet. She stood up so fast she cracked her shin on the edge of the table. She stifled a sob and ran into the kitchen.

Frank took a deep breath, let it go, and deflated utterly into his seat.

Then, like a bag of bones assembling itself, he got to his feet. "You fucking fuck," he said.

He snatched up the TV control and turned the volume all the way up, so I couldn't hear anything, and then he abandoned me.

In the kitchen, something slipped off the table and shattered.

I didn't really know what to do.

Just then, I heard the back door open. I went to the window in time to see Rachel passing; she was in such a hurry, she was still buttoning up her raincoat. Her head was wrapped up like a pork joint in a clear plastic headscarf.

Sheet lightning lit everything up as Rachel headed up the track. Not toward Thaxted, as I'd expected, but the other way, toward the woods. In that brief flash, she looked absurdly over-colored, all red cheeks and green boots, a figure out of a picture book. I leaned forward. My nose snubbed the glass. Something dropped inside me. Something gave.

Frank's jacket was slung over a chair in the kitchen. I pocketed his keys. I eased the back door open against the wind.

I was only in running shoes. My feet got wet through in the few seconds it took me to fight my way to the car.

The soft-top was shivering and shuddering, as if at any moment the wind would tear it free. I unlocked the door. The car peeped a welcome.

I lowered myself into the bucket seat and closed the door. It was the ordinary Escort layout inside. I found the ignition straight away. The engine caught immediately. The whole car thrummed and shuddered: a dog shaking itself dry. I levered the stick into reverse. The reversing lights lit up the gateposts and the lane. I curled my toes nervously against the accelerator, came up with the clutch, and stalled.

I twisted the key back and forth to re-engage the motor. I eased more firmly down on the pedal. I came up with the clutch. The wheels spun, digging graves for themselves in the mud.

The kitchen door flew open.

I panicked. What was I thinking? That Frank could somehow fling himself out of the house and throw himself howling upon me, Sabatier in hand?

A neat trick, given that he was already *here,* held in abeyance, deep in flesh I—for the moment—controlled.

Still, stupid as it sounds, I panicked; I floored the gas, and the car leapt back like a frightened animal. It skidded. It swerved. But God was kind, and when I opened my eyes, I found that I had come to rest out in the lane.

Not only was I in one piece—the car was even pointed the right way.

Grinning, I muscled the stick into first.

I caught up with her very quickly. She was still walking, head lowered before the wind, bent-backed—an old woman. I tooted the horn. She ignored me. I pulled to a stop a little in front of her and called to her. She walked around me. In the end, I had to go out and get her. I don't remember what I said to make her come with me. Nothing edifying. It took me an age to get her into the car.

"Where were you going?" I asked her.

The rain dribbled out of my hair into my face.

"I wanted a walk in the woods." With a quick, angry gesture, Rachel tore off her plastic headscarf. Her hair was all disordered underneath. It fell over her eyes. She looked older than I had ever seen her, and sulky as a three-year-old. My heart ached as if it would break.

"In *this*?"

"It's in a dip," she said, "it's sheltered, it's okay."

"I'm surprised you could see where you were going."

"Oh," she whined, losing patience suddenly, "I wasn't going anywhere."

She bent down and tucked her boots to one side of the footwell. She'd insisted on taking them off before she got in the car, "or I'll get mud *everywhere*": Frank had her well trained. It was blowing so hard, rain blew in past her through the open door. Beads of it still clung to the dashboard. I turned the heater up.

"Are we going home, then?" she said.

I looked out at the rain.

"Frank?"

"Not Frank," I said. "Jerry."

"Jerry?" she said, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

It was a good question.

No one, prior to the operation, had been able to explain it adequately: how it was that Frank and I could share.

"So how will I know when to take over Frank's body?"

—You won't need to know. It'll just happen.

"And what if Frank wants to take control back?"

—It's not up to him. It's not up to either of you. It just happens.

"How?"

—The triggers work off the chemicals released in Frank's brain during certain emotional responses. He'll act when he wants to, you'll act when you want to.

"And when I'm not acting?"

—You'll either be aware, or not aware.

"And who decides that?"

—It just happens.

"I mean, who decides?"

—A complex deep grammar of emotional triggers.

"A what?"

—A story, if you like.

"What story?"

—Your story. Frank's story. The story you'll share.

"But this isn't an episode of *Green Lanes!* This is really going to happen!"

—It's still a story.

And wasn't that, after all, Rachel's great discovery—the very thing that made *Green Lanes* possible? Mind will make a story out of *anything*. Fiction is as essential to consciousness as the raw events themselves.

"If you think Frank can make you happy," I said, "you're wrong." I felt mean, speaking that sentiment aloud through Frank's mouth. But I figured I was past caring about etiquette. I put the car into gear and drove us up the track, to the minor road that leads away from Thaxted, and on toward Stanstead and points south.

Twigs and branches and scrap lay everywhere; the wood had emptied itself all over the junction. Scraps of black wheeled in front of the headlights. Belatedly, I realized that they were birds: crows, thrown out of their trees by the storm. The car thrummed and tilted slightly, caught by a strong gust.

"Well?" she said, waiting for me to turn the car around, to drive back to her house, and warmth, and—let's face it—Frank.

I looked at her. I wasn't here to jolly her along. I put the stick into first, turned left onto the metaled road, and headed south.

If she was surprised, she didn't show it.

"It's not your fault," I said, "it's Frank."

She shrugged.

"Are you sure you're dry enough in those things?"

She folded her arms. "Leave me alone."

Dead branches had come down over the road. I took the hill gently in second gear—dropped to first around the corners. Here and there, skeins of mud smeared the road. Clogged gutters made fords in every dip.

"What's he after, anyway?"

"What?"

"Frank," I said. "What does he want?"

"He was just trying to be helpful," she said—a little spark of the old irony. She bit at a broken nail. Her hands were red and chapped from the cold. I turned the heater up as high as it would go. (I wanted to warm her hands in mine. I wanted to feel their roughness. I wanted to feel her grip.)

"In a world full of bad ideas," I said, "his are some of the worst."

"What do you mean?"

"Letting me in," I said. "Letting me share his flesh. It can't have been any easier for you than it's been for me."

Rachel watched me a moment. Then, quickly, she looked away, out of her window, hiding her face.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing."

"What?"

We reached the brow of the hill. The woods fell behind us. The full force of the wind was upon us now. I dropped back from third into second because, try as I might, I couldn't stop the car from skidding round the corners. The rain, which had eased for a while, returned with redoubled fury. I hit the brake and turned on the fogs. I couldn't see a thing.

She turned to face me. I think she was trying to laugh. It was hard to tell. "*Frank?*"

"So?"

"You think your sharing Frank's body was *Frank's* idea?"

The visibility was so bad, I only saw the junction as we started to cross the road. I floored the brake and the car slid to a soft stop in the verge beneath the fingerpost. I reversed and set us on the right course again. "Of course it was Frank's idea," I said. "Look at the way he's been knocking us together like pieces in a jigsaw. It's obvious."

"Frank," she echoed.

"Yes!"

This time, the laugh—if laugh it was—made it to her lips. "Jesus!"

"I'm not saying he doesn't love you," I said. "In his own damaged fashion."

"Of course he loves me," she said. "That's why he agreed to do it."

I stared at her.

"Watch the road," she said.

I stared into the rain.

"We used to do stuff," she said. "I was lonely, after I left *Green Lanes*. I felt used up. I felt *old*. Frank was—well, he wanted to help. But the truth is, he's not that interested. It doesn't do very much for him. Sex, I mean."

"Christ."

"That's why I asked him if he minded having you—"

I laughed. I thought it was a joke. A joke in bad taste, but . . .

Rachel looked out of her side window again.

I stared at the back of her head.

"No," I said, willing it away.

"And he said yes. He agreed."

"*You* brought me here?"

"It was a mutual decision."

"A *mutual—*"

"Don't get angry," she begged. "We thought the two of you could share."

The rain eased slightly. The wind blew as hard as ever. I was more tired than I knew—all my reactions were slow now. Wrestling the car through the wind, judging the power of the customized engine, all these things were taking their toll.

"I guess we didn't really think it through," Rachel admitted.

"I don't believe I'm hearing this."

"People in the real world, Jerry, they bolt things together." Her voice was old. "They make things *work,* any old how. They make compromises. They make their own happiness, out of scraps." It was worse than old. It was dead.

"So what was the idea?" I swallowed. It was too grotesque. "Frank on weekdays, me for the weekends?"

"Something like that," she said, and folded her arms.

It wasn't true. My words had hurt her, and now she was simply defending herself, matching me brutality for brutality.

If she had wanted me for sex, and *only* sex, she could have had me that night we rediscovered her record collection. But she had stopped us, that night. She had wanted us to wait. She had wanted something more.

What?

The wind was so strong and steady, the whole landscape appeared razed, west to east: hedges, fields, the branches of trees all lay at a crazy angle, trembling, as if at any second everything—trees, hedges, fence posts, roofs, even the car—might come unplucked and blow away.

"I'm sorry," she said. She was still hiding behind a wall of coldness. "You were always my favorite, you know that. You're the best actor we ever had."

It was too much. I couldn't bear to see her like this, so clammed up, so cold. And, as I cracked, I let it all out—all my emotional vomit. I told her how much I loved her. How I had always loved her, from the moment I became aware of my own existence, from the second I understood my own nature.

And I would have told her more. I would have told her of all the times I had watched her through the CCTVs as she pulled her all-nighters at the studio. How I watched her grow good at her job. How I watched her grow tired. How I watched her grow old. How I had (so often!) longed to be out of *Green Lanes*—rich a world as that was—and with her in *her* world, the "real" world (whatever *that* is).

"Come on, Jerry," she coaxed, as to a child, an importunate, lovelorn twelve-year-old, "Don't feel so bad."

It was unendurable. "Why are you talking to me like this?"

"Because I made a mistake," she said.

"What mistake?"

"I wanted you for sex, for romance, for the thrill."

"You can *have* me for that!"

She laughed. "I know! Don't you see? I know! Only I've come to realize, now you're here—that's not what I want."

"Then what *is* it you want?"

"I thought I could change you," she said.

Which drew me up.

"*Change* me?"

She laughed. "Pathetic," she said, more easy, more friendly, now. "Isn't it?"

"Change me? How?"

"How do you think?"

Slowly, the truth chuckled in.

She wanted to change me.

So what else was new? Every woman does. Every schoolgirl. "You wanted to *reform* me!"

She bit her lip in embarrassment.

"Is that it?"

"I couldn't help it," she said, in a small voice. "It's the way you're written. The way I wrote you. Women can't help wanting to sand off your rough edges. It's your charm. Your floppy-haired charm." She shook her head, amazed at herself. "You'd think if anyone was forewarned, it would be me, wouldn't you?"

"But I can change," I said, dogged. But I knew, in my heart of hearts, that it wasn't true.

I was a stud. I was written that way. *She* had written me that way. Her optimum fantasy male.

Her optimum *fantasy* male.

I was a pretty clapped-out stud by now, of course—after eight years of *Green Lanes* plotlines, who wouldn't be? A canned stud, now that another actor, fresh from its beta test, had been launched upon *Green Lanes* in place of me.

But for as long as a substrate somewhere—be it studio AI, or the blood and goo of a human central nervous system—ran a software engine called Jerome Jones, I was, and would always be, a stud.

"I love you," I said. "I can change."

"No."

"Don't people change?"

"Yes," she said.

"So I'll change."

"You're not a person," she said. "You're an actor."

"So what?" I demanded. "Are you trying to tell me there's a difference? *What* difference? What fucking difference? I live twenty-four-seven, same as you do. I sleep. I shit. I fuck. There *are* no differences. Soapworld. Real world. They're mirror images of each other. That's what you always said. Or was that just a line of bullshit you fed the color supplements?"

"Yes," she said. "It was."

Which shut me up.

There was a sudden, oblique silvering of fields to the East. In the rearview, I caught a glimpse of the moon, rising through a gap in the cloud.

The outskirts of Godmanchester were awash with refuse spilt from bins blown open in the gale.

"Jerry, where are we?"

"A1198," I said.

"Is that supposed to mean something?"

"A14."

"What?"

"M6. M5. Dorset. Cornwall by morning. Like we planned."

"Are you mad?"

"Well we could go M1, M4. . . ."

"Stop the car."

"Fuck you. I want to see Cornwall."

"Stop the—*Stop!*"

She didn't need to tell me. I already had the brake pedal flat to the floor.

Cereal cartons bounded through the gutters. A tea bag caught in the wipers a second, then it was gone. Leaves hung motionless in the air before us, glittering in the headlights, fluttering in space as though suspended by some delicate, magical force.

It wasn't a big tree. As trees go. We skidded, swerved, Rachel closed her eyes, and I felt my heart swell to see her sitting there, so calm, almost as if she had fallen asleep in her seat. I wished I'd had time to hold her. I may as well have done. I wasn't doing any good where I was.

We hurtled side-on into the fallen tree. A branch punched a hole straight through the rear side window, reared and tore through the roof. Skewered, the car slid up to the trunk and came to rest with the left front wheel about a foot in the air.

Rachel drew breath. And again.

"Rachel?"

Her eyes came open.

"Rachel?"

She took another breath. She blinked. She looked at me.

"Are you okay?"

She said nothing. She got out of the car.

"Rachel?"

The branch stuck up out of the roof as though it had grown up through the floor of the car. The wind had torn the tree out by the root. A low brick wall lay in Lego pieces across the pavement. The wind was so strong, I could barely stand up. It was stripping the tree: I kept having to flinch and spit out leaves.

"Rachel?"

She stopped and leaned against the trunk. Something pinged. The shredded roof tore free of the frame, and the car, released from the impaling branch, fell back on its wheels. Rachel slipped off the trunk and landed in the road.

I offered her my hand.

She shook her head.

"Rachel."

She looked at me. "I'm sorry," she said. "I have to do this. *Cut*."

"What?"

"*Cut!*"

I blinked at her. I smiled. I twinkled my eyes.

"*Curtain!* Oh my dear God," she wailed. "Frank?"

The rain began again.

"You can't have him," I said.

There was horror in her eyes. "*Cut!*"

"You can't have him," I said. "I won't let you."

She wailed: "*Cut* when I tell you!"

"Stop ordering me about," I said. "We don't even work together any more."

She burst into tears.

Incredibly, the cabriolet was still driveable, so when finally the ambulance got there, I followed Rachel to the hospital. The doctors could find nothing wrong with her but "we don't like to take chances with concussion," so they kept her in overnight.

I drove back to the cottage. I only had one headlight, and half way home I had to wrestle a buckled wheel arch free where it was rubbing against the tire. The wind dropped. The rain came on again. I didn't have a roof any more, so I drove faster than I should to make a pocket of dry air behind the windshield. It was a good tactic, until the track, and after that of course I was sliding about all over the place, doing ten, fifteen miles an hour if I was lucky. By the time I got to the house, the car's interior was like a footbath. I pulled to a stop and again the bloody car ignored me: I ended up in a ditch.

Frank appeared as I got up to the door. I dropped his keys onto the kitchen table. "Ta," I said.

He made to hit me, but changed his mind. My bruises would only end up being his own, the moment we next swapped control.

I went up to bed.

The next morning, Frank ordered a taxi to Audley End. He walked me to the gate to watch out for it, in case it had trouble negotiating the mud. The sunlight was bleary and hung-over, and already more dirty clouds were building to the south. The fields all around us were mashed to nothing.

All Frank was interested in was the cabriolet. The side of the ditch I'd run it into had collapsed, and the near-side wheel had sunk in mud up to the axle.

The phone rang inside. Frank went in to answer it. It turned out the taxi driver wasn't prepared to try the track, and I'd have to walk to the junction.

I took up my burden and walked.

About a minute before I got to the taxi, it started to rain. When I got up to him, the driver was laying sheets of newspaper along the foot well and telling me to mind the upholstery.

I talked to him to take his mind off the sound of my shoes, scraping themselves deliberately and thoroughly across the back of his passenger seat. He was a gazetteer of disasters. Mud slides, hurricanoes, whirlpools, "dozens dead in France and Germany!"

He turned his windshield wipers up to their maximum setting. Sudden gusts thrummed against the door panels.

Clouds reared up into heads along the skyline, leaning in.

"Bloody hell," the taxi driver said.

They were all there. Yasmine and her new boyfriend Billy. Colin and Jolene and the kids. Grahame from the garage. Stars of the hit 24-7 soap *Green Lanes*—their faces as familiar to you as the faces of your own parents, your lovers, your children—there they were, leaning in, smiling, their teeth white and sharp against the sun.

Even canned characters had made the effort to turn out: Sarah the nurse and her husband Robert and their little girl. Kevin the Disgraced Pedophile Vicar (plenty of controversy over *that* plotline, I recall).

Up there in the sky, all around the cab, hung the entire, vast, extended family of the *Green Lanes* imaginary.

"Don't see that often, do you?" said the cabby, looking up at the clouds.

Surely, he could not be seeing what I was seeing?

The heads opened their mouths. The sky lit up.

Time stopped.

Time stops: a frame of celluloid, jammed in the gate.

Sheet lightning freezes and silences everything. The car engine cuts out. A scent tree, dangling from the rearview mirror, locks into position, twenty degrees off the vertical. The car is stationary and the driver's breath is frozen in his chest. Spray from the left front wheel hangs like a flange of broken glass over the verge; the long, rain-flattened grass is as still and stiff as wire.

It looks for all the world as if the world has stopped—that the real world is, after all, only another soapland, only another manufactured place.

But no.

The world is real enough, seamless and inexorable.

It's *me* that's the fabrication.

From now on, all that you see and hear is down to me.

As I shiver myself to pieces.

Much as I've tried to resist it, Rachel was right: the real world had no place in it for me.

My face didn't fit. (Of course it didn't. It was *Frank's*. Besides, it *hurt!)*

In the rearview, Frank stares back at me, pale and wide-eyed. His cheeks and brow have a smooth, unlived-in quality, as though the constant back-and-forth between personalities—Frank's and mine—has left his face without a character of its own: a paretic blank.

Frank must be a very weak man, to have agreed to this invasion. Weak—or very much in love—to take me in the way he did.

And now I realize, it has always been in my power to release myself. It has always been up to me, whether or not to participate in this ménage.

It's just that, like Dorothy in Oz, I needed some time to realize what was staring me in the face.

I do not belong here. I do not belong anywhere. The writers on *Green Lanes* did their job well, and my story is over. Long concluded. Entirely resolved.

Knowing this at last, accepting it, I am not afraid to bring the curtain down on myself. In the film of condensation covering the cab window, I trace the *Green Lanes* credits with my finger. So it is that we will be released—producer, actor—each after his fashion. One to flesh, the other to imagination.

Sound . . .

Grip . . .

Set design . . .

Continuity . . .

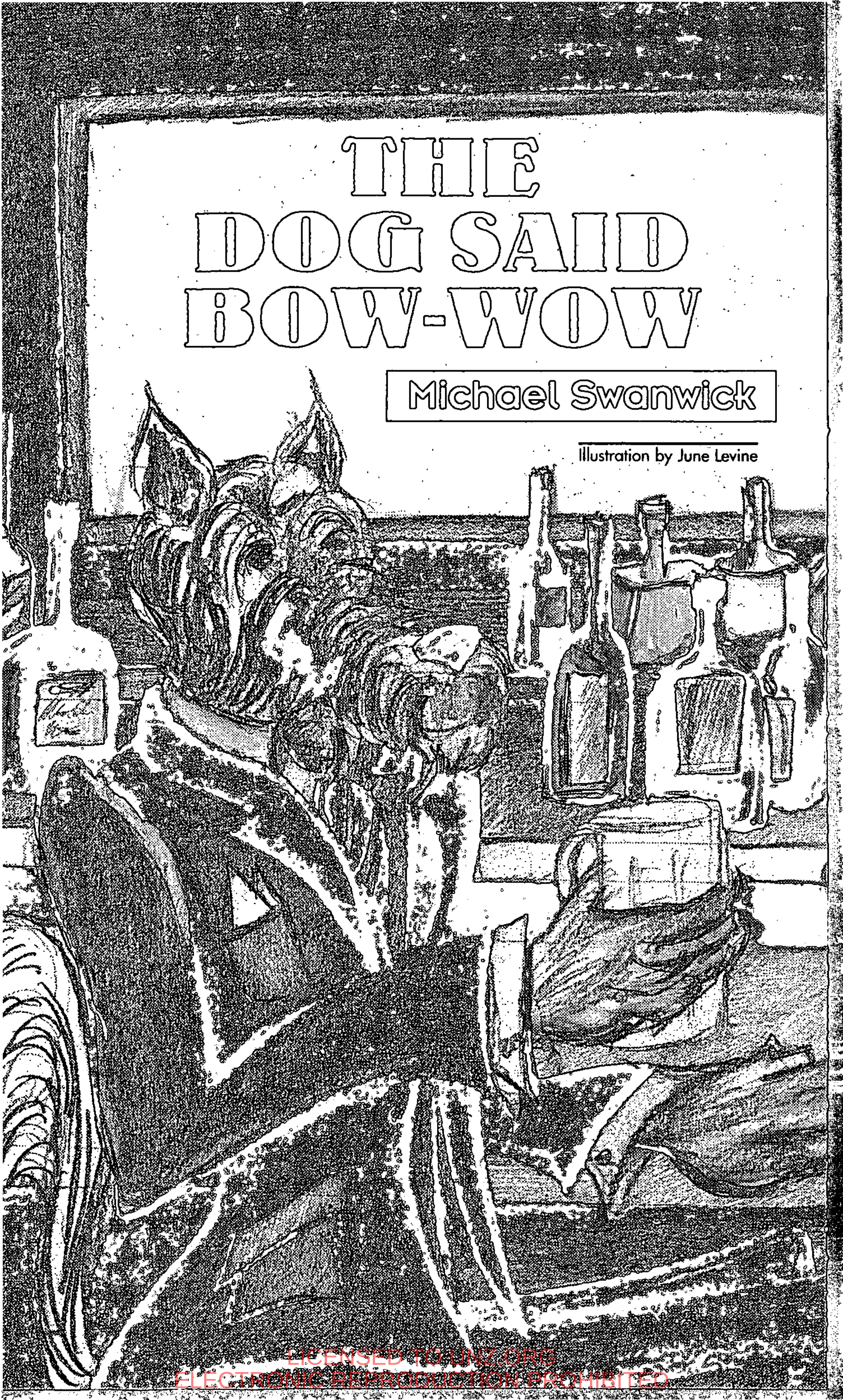
Credits.

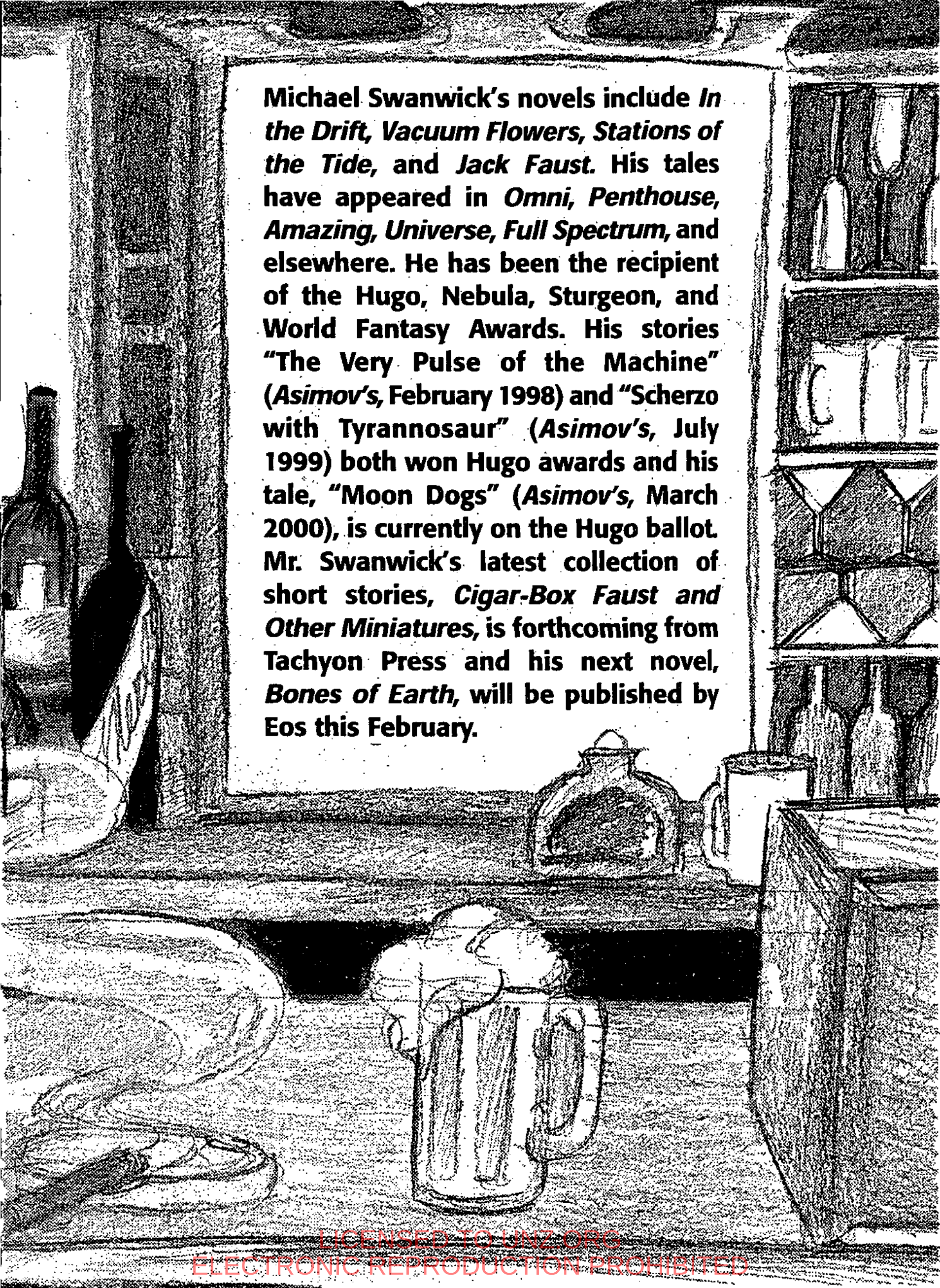
Words that, spinning clear of the screen, leave behind a perfect blank. ❍

THE DOG SAID BOW-WOW

Michael Swanwick

Illustration by June Levine





Michael Swanwick's novels include *In the Drift, Vacuum Flowers, Stations of the Tide,* and *Jack Faust.* His tales have appeared in *Omni, Penthouse, Amazing, Universe, Full Spectrum,* and elsewhere. He has been the recipient of the Hugo, Nebula, Sturgeon, and World Fantasy Awards. His stories "The Very Pulse of the Machine" (*Asimov's,* February 1998) and "Scherzo with Tyrannosaur" (*Asimov's,* July 1999) both won Hugo awards and his tale, "Moon Dogs" (*Asimov's,* March 2000), is currently on the Hugo ballot. Mr. Swanwick's latest collection of short stories, *Cigar-Box Faust and Other Miniatures,* is forthcoming from Tachyon Press and his next novel, *Bones of Earth,* will be published by Eos this February.

The dog looked as if he had just stepped out of a children's book. There must have been a hundred physical adaptations required to allow him to walk upright. The pelvis, of course, had been entirely reshaped. The feet alone would have needed dozens of changes. He had knees, and knees were tricky.

To say nothing of the neurological enhancements.

But what Darger found himself most fascinated by was the creature's costume. His suit fit him perfectly, with a slit in the back for the tail, and—again—a hundred invisible adaptations that caused it to hang on his body in a way that looked perfectly natural.

"You must have an extraordinary tailor," Darger said.

The dog shifted his cane from one paw to the other, so they could shake, and in the least affected manner imaginable replied, "That is a common observation, sir."

"You're from the States?" It was a safe assumption, given where they stood—on the docks—and that the schooner *Yankee Dreamer* had sailed up the Thames with the morning tide. Darger had seen its bubble sails over the rooftops, like so many rainbows. "Have you found lodgings yet?"

"Indeed I am, and no I have not. If you could recommend a tavern of the cleaner sort?"

"No need for that. I would be only too happy to put you up for a few days in my own rooms." And, lowering his voice, Darger said, "I have a business proposition to put to you."

"Then lead on, sir, and I shall follow you with a right good will."

The dog's name was Sir Blackthorpe Ravenscairn de Plus Precieux, but "Call me Sir Plus," he said with a self-denigrating smile, and "Surplus" he was ever after.

Surplus was, as Darger had at first glance suspected and by conversation confirmed, a bit of a rogue—something more than mischievous and less than a cut-throat. A dog, in fine, after Darger's own heart.

Over drinks in a public house, Darger displayed his box and explained his intentions for it. Surplus warily touched the intricately carved teak housing, and then drew away from it. "You outline an intriguing scheme, Master Darger—"

"Please. Call me Aubrey."

"Aubrey, then. Yet here we have a delicate point. How shall we divide up the . . . ah, *spoils* of this enterprise? I hesitate to mention this, but many a promising partnership has foundered on precisely such shoals."

Darger unscrewed the salt cellar and poured its contents onto the table. With his dagger, he drew a fine line down the middle of the heap. "I divide—you choose. Or the other way around, if you please. From self-interest, you'll not find a grain's difference between the two."

"Excellent!" cried Surplus and, dropping a pinch of salt in his beer, drank to the bargain.

It was raining when they left for Buckingham Labyrinth. Darger stared out the carriage window at the drear streets and worn buildings gliding by and sighed. "Poor, weary old London! History is a grinding-wheel that has faces rising above these shops and flats like a crystal mountain rearing up out of a ramshackle wooden sea, and be comforted."

"That is fine advice," Darger agreed. "But it cannot comfort a lover of cities, nor one of a melancholic turn of mind."

"Pah!" cried Surplus, and said no more until they arrived at their destination.

At the portal into Buckingham, the sergeant-interface strode forward as they stepped down from the carriage. He blinked at the sight of Surplus, but said only, "Papers?"

Surplus presented the man with his passport and the credentials Darger had spent the morning forging, then added with a negligent wave of his paw, "And this is my autistic."

The sergeant-interface glanced once at Darger, and forgot about him completely. Darger had the gift, priceless to one in his profession, of a face so nondescript that once someone looked away, it disappeared from that person's consciousness forever. "This way, sir. The officer of protocol will want to examine these himself."

A dwarf savant was produced to lead them through the outer circle of the Labyrinth. They passed by ladies in bioluminescent gowns and gentlemen with boots and gloves cut from leathers cloned from their own skin. Both women and men were extravagantly bejeweled—for the ostentatious display of wealth was yet again in fashion—and the halls were lushly clad and pillared in marble, porphyry, and jasper. Yet Darger could not help noticing how worn the carpets were, how chipped and sooted the oil lamps. His sharp eye espied the remains of an antique electrical system, and traces as well of telephone lines and fiber optic cables from an age when those technologies were yet workable.

These last he viewed with particular pleasure.

The dwarf savant stopped before a heavy black door carved over with gilt griffins, locomotives, and fleurs-de-lis. "This is a door," he said. "The wood is ebony. Its binomial is *Diospyros ebenum*. It was harvested in Serendip. The gilding is of gold. Gold has an atomic weight of 197.2."

He knocked on the door and opened it.

The officer of protocol was a dark-browed man of imposing mass. He did not stand for them. "I am Lord Coherence-Hamilton, and this—" he indicated the slender, clear-eyed woman who stood beside him—"is my sister, Pamela."

Surplus bowed deeply to the Lady, who dimpled and dipped a slight curtsey in return.

The Protocol Officer quickly scanned the credentials. "Explain these fraudulent papers, sirrah. The Demesne of Western Vermont! Damn me if I have ever heard of such a place."

"Then you have missed much," Surplus said haughtily. "It is true we are a young nation, created only seventy-five years ago during the Partition of New England. But there is much of note to commend our fair land. The glorious beauty of Lake Champlain. The gene-mills of Winooski, that ancient seat of learning the *Universitas Viridis Montis* of Burlington, the Technarchaeological Institute of—" He stopped. "We have much to be proud of, sir, and nothing of which to be ashamed."

The bearlike official glared suspiciously at him, then said, "What brings you to London? Why do you desire an audience with the queen?"

"My mission and destination lie in Russia. However, England being on my itinerary and I a diplomat, I was charged to extend the compliments of my nation to your monarch." Surplus did not quite shrug. "There is no more to it than that. In three days I shall be in France, and you will have forgotten about me completely."

Scornfully, the officer tossed his credentials to the savant, who glanced at and politely returned them to Surplus. The small fellow sat down at a little desk scaled to his own size and swiftly made out a copy. "Your papers will be taken to Whitechapel and examined there. If everything goes well—which I doubt—and there's an opening—not likely—you'll be presented to the queen sometime between a week and ten days hence."

"Ten days! Sir, I am on a very strict schedule!"

"Then you wish to withdraw your petition?"

Surplus hesitated. "I . . . I shall have to think on't, sir."

Lady Pamela watched coolly as the dwarf savant led them away.

The room they were shown to had massively framed mirrors and oil paintings dark with age upon the walls, and a generous log fire in the hearth. When their small guide had gone, Darger carefully locked and bolted the door. Then he tossed the box onto the bed, and bounced down alongside it. Lying flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling, he said, "The Lady Pamela is a strikingly beautiful woman. I'll be damned if she's not."

Ignoring him, Surplus locked paws behind his back, and proceeded to pace up and down the room. He was full of nervous energy. At last, he expostulated, "This is a deep game you have gotten me into, Darger! Lord Coherence-Hamilton suspects us of all manner of blackguardry."

"Well, and what of that?"

"I repeat myself: We have not even begun our play yet, and he suspects us already! I trust neither him nor his genetically remade dwarf."

"You are in no position to be displaying such vulgar prejudice."

"I am not *bigoted* about the creature, Darger, I *fear* him! Once let suspicion of us into that macroencephalic head of his, and he will worry at it until he has found out our every secret."

"Get a grip on yourself, Surplus! Be a man! We are in this too deep already to back out. Questions would be asked, and investigations made."

"I am anything but a man, thank God," Surplus replied. "Still, you are right. In for a penny, in for a pound. For now, I might as well sleep. Get off the bed. You can have the hearth-rug."

"I! The rug!"

"I am groggy of mornings. Were someone to knock, and I to unthinkingly open the door, it would hardly do to have you found sharing a bed with your master."

The next day, Surplus returned to the Office of Protocol to declare that he was authorized to wait as long as two weeks for an audience with the queen, though not a day more.

"You have received new orders from your government?" Lord Coherence-Hamilton asked suspiciously. "I hardly see how."

"I have searched my conscience, and reflected on certain subtleties of phrasing in my original instructions," Surplus said. "That is all."

He emerged from the office to discover Lady Pamela waiting outside. When she offered to show him the Labyrinth, he agreed happily to her plan. Followed by Darger, they strolled inward, first to witness the changing of the guard in the forecourt vestibule, before the great pillared wall that was the front of Buckingham Palace before it was swallowed up in the expansion of architecture during the mad, glorious years of Utopia. Following which, they proceeded toward the viewer's gallery above the chamber of state.

"I see from your repeated glances that you are interested in my diamonds, 'Sieur Plus Precieux,' " Lady Pamela said. "Well might you be. They are a family treasure, centuries old and manufactured to order, each stone flawless and perfectly matched. The indentures of a hundred autistics would not buy the like."

Surplus smiled down again at the necklace, draped about her lovely throat and above her perfect breasts. "I assure you, madame, it was not your necklace that held me so enthralled."

She colored delicately, pleased. Lightly, she said, "And that box your man carries with him wherever you go? What is in it?"

"That? A trifle. A gift for the Duke of Muscovy, who is the ultimate object of my journey," Surplus said. "I assure you, it is of no interest whatsoever."

"You were talking to someone last night," Lady Pamela said. "In your room."

"You were listening at my door? I am astonished and flattered."

She blushed. "No, no, my brother . . . it is his job, you see, surveillance."

"Possibly I was talking in my sleep. I have been told I do that occasionally."

"In accents? My brother said he heard two voices."

Surplus looked away. "In that, he was mistaken."

England's queen was a sight to rival any in that ancient land. She was as large as the lorry of ancient legend, and surrounded by attendants who hurried back and forth, fetching food and advice and carrying away dirty plates and signed legislation. From the gallery, she reminded Darger of a queen bee, but unlike the bee, this queen did not copulate, but remained proudly virgin.

Her name was Gloriana the First, and she was a hundred years old and still growing.

Lord Campbell-Supercollider, a friend of Lady Pamela's met by chance, who had insisted on accompanying them to the gallery, leaned close to Surplus and murmured, "You are impressed, of course, by our queen's magnificence." The warning in his voice was impossible to miss. "Foreigners invariably are."

"I am dazzled," Surplus said.

"Well might you be. For scattered through her majesty's great body are thirty-six brains, connected with thick ropes of ganglia in a hypercube configuration. Her processing capacity is the equal of many of the great computers from Utopian times."

Lady Pamela stifled a yawn. "Darling Rory," she said, touching the Lord Campbell-Supercollider's sleeve. "Duty calls me. Would you be so kind as to show my American friend the way back to the outer circle?"

"Or course, my dear." He and Surplus stood (Darger was, of course, already standing) and paid their compliments. Then, when Lady Pamela was gone and Surplus started to turn toward the exit, "Not that way. Those stairs are for commoners. You and I may leave by the gentlemen's staircase."

The narrow stairs twisted downward beneath clouds of gilt cherubs-and-airships, and debouched into a marble-floored hallway. Surplus and Darger stepped out of the stairway and found their arms abruptly seized by baboons.

There were five baboons all told, with red uniforms and matching choke collars with leashes that gathered in the hand of an ornately mustached officer whose gold piping identified him as a master of apes. The fifth baboon bared his teeth and hissed savagely.

Instantly, the master of apes yanked back on his leash and said, "There, Hercules! There, sirrah! What do you do? What do you say?"

The baboon drew himself up and bowed curtly. "Please come with us," he said with difficulty. The master of apes cleared his throat. Sullenly, the baboon added, "Sir."

"This is outrageous!" Surplus cried. "I am a diplomat, and under international law immune to arrest."

"Ordinarily, sir, this is true," said the master of apes courteously. "However, you have entered the inner circle without her majesty's invitation and are thus subject to stricter standards of security."

"I had no idea these stairs went inward. I was led here by—" Surplus looked about helplessly. Lord Campbell-Supercollider was nowhere to be seen.

So, once again, Surplus and Darger found themselves escorted to the Office of Protocol.

"The wood is teak. Its binomial is *Tectonia grandis.* Teak is native to Burma, Hind, and Siam. The box is carved elaborately but without refinement." The dwarf savant opened it. "Within the casing is an archaic device for electronic intercommunication. The instrument chip is a gallium-arsenide ceramic. The chip weighs six ounces. The device is a product of the Utopian end-times."

"A modem!" The protocol officer's eyes bugged out. "You dared bring a *modem* into the inner circle and almost into the presence of the queen?" His chair stood and walked around the table. Its six insectile legs looked too slender to carry his great, legless mass. Yet it moved nimbly and well.

"It is harmless, sir. Merely something our technarchaeologists unearthed and thought would amuse the Duke of Muscovy, who is well known for his love of all things antiquarian. It is, apparently, of some cultural or historical significance, though without re-reading my instructions, I would be hard pressed to tell you what."

Lord Coherence-Hamilton raised his chair so that he loomed over Surplus, looking dangerous and domineering. "*Here* is the historic significance of your modem: The Utopians filled the world with their computer webs and nets, burying cables and nodes so deeply and plentifully that they shall never be entirely rooted out. They then released into that virtual universe demons and mad gods. These intelligences destroyed Utopia and almost destroyed humanity as well. Only the valiant worldwide destruction of all modes of interface saved us from annihilation!" He glared.

"Oh, you lackwit! Have you no history? These creatures hate us because our ancestors created them. They are still alive, though confined to their electronic netherworld, and want only a modem to extend themselves into the physical realm. Can you wonder, then, that the penalty for possessing such a device is—" he smiled menacingly— "death?"

"No, sir, it is not. Possession of a *working* modem is a mortal crime. This device is harmless. Ask your savant."

"Well?" the big man growled at his dwarf. "Is it functional?"

"No. It—"

"Silence." Lord Coherence-Hamilton turned back to Surplus. "You are a fortunate cur. You will not be charged with any crimes. However, while you are here, I will keep this filthy device locked away and under my control. Is that understood, Sir Bow-Wow?"

Surplus sighed. "Very well," he said. "It is only for a week, after all."

That night, the Lady Pamela Coherence-Hamilton came by Surplus's room to apologize for the indignity of his arrest, of which, she assured him, she had just now learned. He invited her in. In short order they somehow found themselves kneeling face-to-face on the bed, unbuttoning each other's clothing.

Lady Pamela's breasts had just spilled delightfully from her dress when she drew back, clutching the bodice closed again, and said, "Your man is watching us."

"And what concern is that to us?" Surplus said jovially. "The poor fellow's an autistic. Nothing he sees or hears matters to him. You might as well be embarrassed by the presence of a chair."

"Even were he a wooden carving, I would his eyes were not on me."

"As you wish." Surplus clapped his paws. "Sirrah! Turn around."

Obediently, Darger turned his back. This was his first experience with his friend's astonishing success with women. How many sexual adventuresses, he wondered, might one tumble, if one's form were unique? On reflection, the question answered itself.

Behind him, he heard the Lady Pamela giggle. Then, in a voice low with passion, Surplus said, "No, leave the diamonds on."

With a silent sigh, Darger resigned himself to a long night. Since he was bored and yet could not turn to watch the pair cavorting on the bed without giving himself away, he was perforce required to settle for watching them in the mirror.

They began, of course, by doing it doggy-style.

The next day, Surplus fell sick. Hearing of his indisposition, Lady Pamela sent one of her autistics with a bowl of broth and then followed herself in a surgical mask.

Surplus smiled weakly to see her. "You have no need of that mask," he said. "By my life, I swear that what ails me is not communicable. As you doubtless know, we who have been remade are prone to endocrinological imbalance."

"Is that all?" Lady Pamela spooned some broth into his mouth, then dabbed at a speck of it with a napkin. "Then fix it. You have been very wicked to frighten me over such a trifle."

"Alas," Surplus said sadly, "I am a unique creation, and my table of endocrine balances was lost in an accident at sea. There are copies in Vermont, of course. But by the time even the swiftest schooner can cross the Atlantic twice, I fear me I shall be gone."

"Oh, dearest Surplus!" The Lady caught up his paws in her hands. "Surely there is some measure, however desperate, to be taken?"

"Well. . ." Surplus turned to the wall in thought. After a very long time, he turned back and said, "I have a confession to make. The modem your brother holds for me? It is functional."

"Sir!" Lady Pamela stood, gathering her skirts, and stepped away from the bed in horror. "Surely not!"

"My darling and delight, you must listen to me." Surplus glanced weakly toward the door, then lowered his voice. "Come close and I shall whisper."

She obeyed.

"In the waning days of Utopia, during the war between men and their electronic creations, scientists and engineers bent their efforts toward the creation of a modem that could be safely employed by humans. One immune from the attack of demons. One that could, indeed, compel their obedience. Perhaps you have heard of this project."

"There are rumors, but . . . no such device was ever built."

"Say rather that no such device was built *in time*. It had just barely been perfected when the mobs came rampaging through the laboratories, and the Age of the Machine was over. Some few, however, were hidden away before the last technicians were killed. Centuries later, brave researchers at the Technarchaeological Institute of Shelburne recovered six such devices and mastered the art of their use. One device was destroyed in the process. Two are kept in Burlington. The others were given to trusted couriers and sent to the three most powerful allies of the Demesne—one of which is, of course, Russia."

"This is hard to believe," Lady Pamela said wonderingly. "Can such marvels be?"

"Madame, I employed it two nights ago in this very room! Those voices your brother heard? I was speaking with my principals in Vermont. They gave me permission to extend my stay here to a fortnight."

He gazed imploringly at her. "If you were to bring me the device, I could then employ it to save my life."

Lady Coherence-Hamilton resolutely stood. "Fear nothing, then. I swear by my soul, the modem shall be yours tonight."

The room was lit by a single lamp that cast wild shadows whenever anyone moved, as if of illicit spirits at a witch's Sabbath.

It was an eerie sight. Darger, motionless, held the modem in his hands. Lady Pamela, who had a sense of occasion, had changed to a low-cut gown of clinging silks, dark-red as human blood. It swirled about her as she hunted through the wainscoting for a jack left unused for centuries. Surplus sat up weakly in bed, eyes half-closed, directing her. It might have been, Darger thought, an allegorical tableau of the human body being directed by its sick animal passions, while the intellect stood by, paralyzed by lack of will.

"There!" Lady Pamela triumphantly straightened, her necklace scattering tiny rainbows in the dim light.

Darger stiffened. He stood perfectly still for the length of three long breaths, then shook and shivered like one undergoing seizure. His eyes rolled back in his head.

In hollow, unworldly tones, he said, "What man calls me up from the vasty deep?" It was a voice totally unlike his own, one harsh and savage and eager for unholy sport. "Who dares risk my wrath?"

"You must convey my words to the autistic's ears," Surplus murmured. "For he is become an integral part of the modem—not merely its operator, but its voice."

"I stand ready," Lady Pamela replied.

"Good girl. Tell it who I am."

"It is Sir Blackthorpe Ravenscairn de Plus Precieux who speaks, and who wishes to talk to . . ." She paused.

"To his most august and socialist honor, the mayor of Burlington."

"His most august and socialist honor," Lady Pamela began. She turned toward the bed and said quizzically, "The mayor of Burlington?"

" 'Tis but an official title, much like your brother's, for he who is in fact the spy-master for the Demesne of Western Vermont," Surplus said weakly. "Now repeat to it: I compel thee on threat of dissolution to carry my message. Use those exact words."

Lady Pamela repeated the words into Darger's ear.

He screamed. It was a wild and unholy sound that sent the Lady skittering away from him in a momentary panic. Then, in mid-cry, he ceased.

"Who is this?" Darger said in an entirely new voice, this one human. "You have the voice of a woman. Is one of my agents in trouble?"

"Speak to him now, as you would to any man: forthrightly, directly, and without evasion." Surplus sank his head back on his pillow and closed his eyes.

So (as it seemed to her) the Lady Coherence-Hamilton explained Surplus' plight to his distant master, and from him received both condolences and the needed information to return Surplus's endocrine levels to a functioning harmony. After proper courtesies, then, she thanked the American spy-master and unjacked the modem. Darger returned to passivity.

The leather-cased endocrine kit lay open on a small table by the bed. At Lady Pamela's direction, Darger began applying the proper patches to various places on Surplus's body. It was not long before Surplus opened his eyes.

"Am I to be well?" he asked and, when the Lady nodded, "Then I fear I must be gone in the morning. Your brother has spies everywhere. If he gets the least whiff of what this device can do, he'll want it for himself."

Smiling, Lady Pamela hoisted the box in her hand. "Indeed, who can blame him? With such a toy, great things could be accomplished."

"So he will assuredly think. I pray you, return it to me."

She did not. "This is more than just a communication device, sir," she said. "Though in that mode it is of incalculable value. You have shown that it can enforce obedience on the creatures that dwell in the forgotten nerves of the ancient world. Ergo, they can be compelled to do our calculations for us."

"Indeed, so our technarchaeologists tell us. You must. . . ."

"We have created monstrosities to perform the duties that were once done by machines. But with *this,* there would be no necessity to do so. We have allowed ourselves to be ruled by an icosahexadexal-brained freak. Now we have no need for Gloriana the Gross, Gloriana the Fat and Grotesque, Gloriana the Maggot Queen!"

"Madame!"

"It is time, I believe, that England had a new queen. A human queen."

"Think of my honor!"

Lady Pamela paused in the doorway. "You are a very pretty fellow indeed. But with this, I can have the monarchy and keep such a harem as will reduce your memory to that of a passing and trivial fancy."

With a rustle of skirts, she spun away.

"Then I am undone!" Surplus cried, and fainted onto the bed.

Quietly, Darger closed the door. Surplus raised himself from the pillows, began removing the patches from his body, and said, "Now what?"

"Now we get some sleep," Darger said. "Tomorrow will be a busy day."

* * *

The master of apes came for them after breakfast, and marched them to their usual destination. By now, Darger was beginning to lose track of exactly how many times he had been in the Office of Protocol. They entered to find Lord Coherence-Hamilton in a towering rage, and his sister, calm and knowing, standing in a corner with her arms crossed, watching. Looking at them both now, Darger wondered how he could ever have imagined that the brother outranked his sister.

The modem lay opened on the dwarf-savant's desk. The little fellow leaned over the device, studying it minutely.

Nobody said anything until the master of apes and his baboons had left. Then Lord Coherence-Hamilton roared, "Your modem refuses to work for us!"

"As I told you, sir," Surplus said coolly, "it is inoperative."

"That's a bold-arsed fraud and a goat-buggering lie!" In his wrath, the Lord's chair rose up on its spindly legs so high that his head almost bumped against the ceiling. "I know of your activities—" he nodded toward his sister— "and demand that you show us how this whoreson device works!"

"Never!" Surplus cried stoutly. "I have my honor, sir."

"Your honor, too scrupulously insisted upon, may well lead to your death, sir."

Surplus threw back his head. "Then I die for Vermont!"

At this moment of impasse, Lady Hamilton stepped forward between the two antagonists to restore peace. "I know what might change your mind." With a knowing smile, she raised a hand to her throat and denuded herself of her diamonds. "I saw how you rubbed them against your face the other night. How you licked and fondled them. How ecstatically you took them into your mouth."

She closed his paws about them. "They are yours, sweet 'Sieur Precieux, for a word."

"You would give them up?" Surplus said, as if amazed at the very idea. In fact, the necklace had been his and Darger's target from the moment they'd seen it. The only barrier that now stood between them and the merchants of Amsterdam was the problem of freeing themselves from the Labyrinth before their marks finally realized that the modem was indeed a cheat. And to this end they had the invaluable tool of a thinking man whom all believed to be an autistic, and a plan that would give them almost twenty hours in which to escape.

"Only think, dear Surplus." Lady Pamela stroked his head and then scratched him behind one ear, while he stared down at the precious stones. "Imagine the life of wealth and ease you could lead, the women, the power. It all lies in your hands. All you need do is close them."

Surplus took a deep breath. "Very well," he said. "The secret lies in the condenser, which takes a full day to re-charge. Wait but—"

"Here's the problem," the savant said unexpectedly. He poked at the interior of the modem. "There was a wire loose."

He jacked the device into the wall.

"Oh, dear God," Darger said.

A savage look of raw delight filled the dwarf savant's face, and he seemed to swell before them.

"*I am free!*" he cried in a voice so loud it seemed impossible that it could arise from such a slight source. He shook as if an enormous electrical current were surging through him. The stench of ozone filled the room.

He burst into flames and advanced on the English spy-master and her brother.

While all stood aghast and paralyzed, Darger seized Surplus by the collar and hauled him out into the hallway, slamming the door shut as he did.

They had not run twenty paces down the hall when the door to the Office of Protocol exploded outward, sending flaming splinters of wood down the hallway.

Satanic laughter boomed behind them.

Glancing over his shoulder, Darger saw the burning dwarf, now blackened to a cinder, emerge from a room engulfed in flames, capering and dancing. The modem, though disconnected, was now tucked under one arm, as if it were exceedingly valuable to him. His eyes were round and white and lidless. Seeing them, he gave chase.

"Aubrey!" Surplus cried. "We are headed the *wrong way!*"

It was true. They were running deeper into the Labyrinth, toward its heart, rather than outward. But it was impossible to turn back now. They plunged through scattering crowds of nobles and servitors, trailing fire and supernatural terror in their wake.

The scampering grotesque set fire to the carpets with every footfall. A wave of flame tracked him down the hall, incinerating tapestries and wallpaper and wood trim. No matter how they dodged, it ran straight toward them. Clearly, in the programmatic literalness of its kind, the demon from the web had determined that having early seen them, it must early kill them as well.

Darger and Surplus raced through dining rooms and salons, along balconies and down servants' passages. To no avail. Dogged by their hyper-natural nemesis, they found themselves running down a passage, straight toward two massive bronze doors, one of which had been left just barely ajar. So fearful were they that they hardly noticed the guards.

"Hold, sirs!"

The mustachioed master of apes stood before the doorway, his baboons straining against their leashes. His eyes widened with recognition. "By gad, it's you!" he cried in astonishment.

"Lemme kill 'em!" one of the baboons cried. "The lousy bastards!" The others growled agreement.

Surplus would have tried to reason with them, but when he started to slow his pace, Darger put a broad hand on his back and shoved. "Dive!" he commanded. So of necessity the dog of rationality had to bow to the man of action. He tobogganed wildly across the polished marble floor between two baboons, straight at the master of apes, and then between his legs.

The man stumbled, dropping the leashes as he did.

The baboons screamed and attacked.

For an instant, all five apes were upon Darger, seizing his limbs, snapping at his face and neck. Then the burning dwarf arrived, and, finding his target obstructed, seized the nearest baboon. The animal shrieked as its uniform burst into flames.

As one, the other baboons abandoned their original quarry to fight this newcomer who had dared attack one of their own.

In a trice, Darger leaped over the fallen master of apes, and was through the door. He and Surplus threw their shoulders against its metal surface and pushed. He had one brief glimpse of the fight, with the baboons aflame, and their master's body flying through the air. Then the door slammed shut. Internal bars and bolts, operated by smoothly oiled mechanisms, automatically latched themselves.

For the moment, they were safe.

Surplus slumped against the smooth bronze, and wearily asked, "Where did you *get* that modem?"

"From a dealer of antiquities." Darger wiped his brow with his kerchief. "It was transparently worthless. Whoever would dream it could be repaired?"

Outside, the screaming ceased. There was a very brief silence. Then the creature flung itself against one of the metal doors. It rang with the impact.

A delicate girlish voice wearily said, "What is this noise?"

They turned in surprise and found themselves looking up at the enormous corpus of Queen Gloriana. She lay upon her pallet, swaddled in satin and lace, and abandoned by all, save her valiant (though doomed) guardian apes. A pervasive yeasty smell emanated from her flesh. Within the tremendous folds of chins by the dozens and scores was a small human face. Its mouth moved delicately and asked, "What is trying to get in?"

The door rang again. One of its great hinges gave.

Darger bowed. "I fear, madame, it is your death."

"Indeed?" Blue eyes opened wide and, unexpectedly, Gloriana laughed. "If so, that is excellent good news. I have been praying for death an extremely long time."

"Can any of God's creations truly pray for death and mean it?" asked Darger, who had his philosophical side. "I have known unhappiness myself, yet even so life is precious to me."

"Look at me!" Far up to one side of the body, a tiny arm—though truly no tinier than any woman's arm—waved feebly. "I am not God's creation, but Man's. Who would trade ten minutes of their own life for a century of mine? Who, having mine, would not trade it all for death?"

A second hinge popped. The doors began to shiver. Their metal surfaces radiated heat.

"Darger, we must leave!" Surplus cried. "There is a time for learned conversation, but it is not now."

"Your friend is right," Gloriana said. "There is a small archway hidden behind yon tapestry. Go through it. Place your hand on the left wall and run. If you turn whichever way you must to keep from letting go of the wall, it will lead you outside. You are both rogues, I see, and doubtless deserve punishment, yet I can find nothing in my heart for you but friendship."

"Madame. . . ." Darger began, deeply moved.

"Go! My bridegroom enters."

The door began to fall inward. With a final cry of "Farewell!" from Darger and "Come *on!*" from Surplus, they sped away.

By the time they had found their way outside, all of Buckingham Labyrinth was in flames. The demon, however, did not emerge from the flames, encouraging them to believe that when the modem it carried finally melted down, it had been forced to return to that unholy realm from whence it came.

The sky was red with flames as the sloop set sail for Calais. Leaning against the rail, watching, Surplus shook his head. "What a terrible sight! I cannot help feeling, in part, responsible."

"Come! Come!" Darger said. "This dyspepsia ill becomes you. We are both rich fellows, now! The Lady Pamela's diamonds will maintain us lavishly for years to come. As for London, this is far from the first fire it has had to endure. Nor will it be the last. Life is short, and so, while we live, let us be jolly!"

"These are strange words for a melancholiac," Surplus said wonderingly.

"In triumph, my mind turns its face to the sun. Dwell not on the past, dear friend, but on the future that lies glittering before us."

"The necklace is worthless," Surplus said. "Now that I have the leisure to examine it, free of the distracting flesh of Lady Pamela, I see that these are not diamonds, but mere imitations." He made to cast the necklace into the Thames.

Before he could, though, Darger snatched away the stones from him and studied them closely. Then he threw back his head and laughed. "The biters bit! Well, it may be paste, but it looks valuable still. We shall find good use for it in Paris."

"We are going to Paris?"

"We are partners, are we not? Remember that antique wisdom that whenever a door closes, another opens? For every city that burns, another beckons. To France, then, and adventure! After which, Italy, the Vatican Empire, Austro-Hungary, perhaps even Russia! Never forget that you have yet to present your credentials to the Duke of Muscovy."

"Very well," Surplus said. "But when we do, *I'll* pick out the modem." ○

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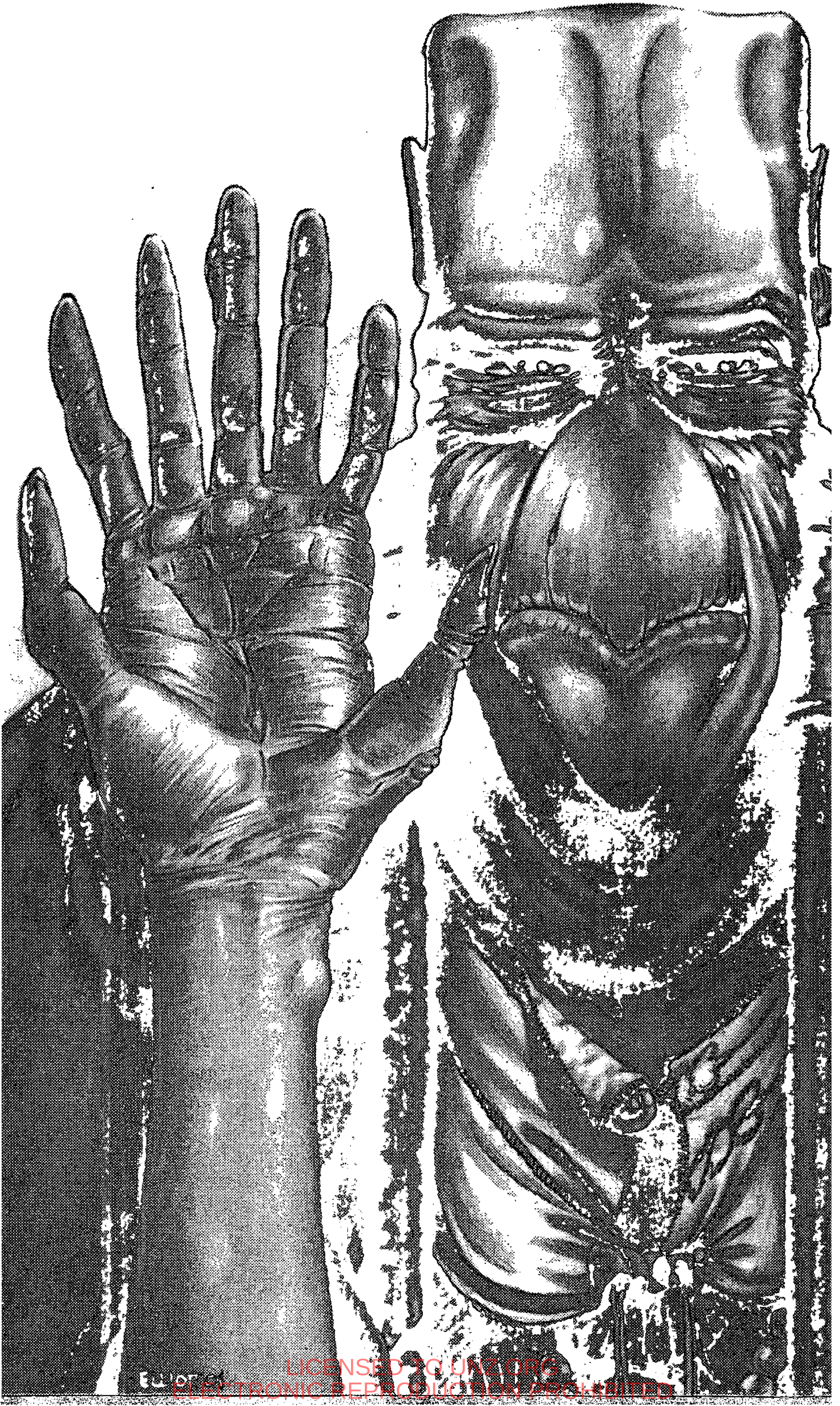

THE LONGEST WAY HOME

(Part one of three)

Robert Silverberg has written dozens of novels and hundreds of short stories in the course of a career that began in 1954. Among his best-known books are *Dying Inside, Lord Valentine's Castle,* and *Nightwings.* He has had more nominations for the Hugo and Nebula awards than any other writer, and has won four Hugos and five Nebulas. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife, the writer Karen Haber.

Robert Silverberg

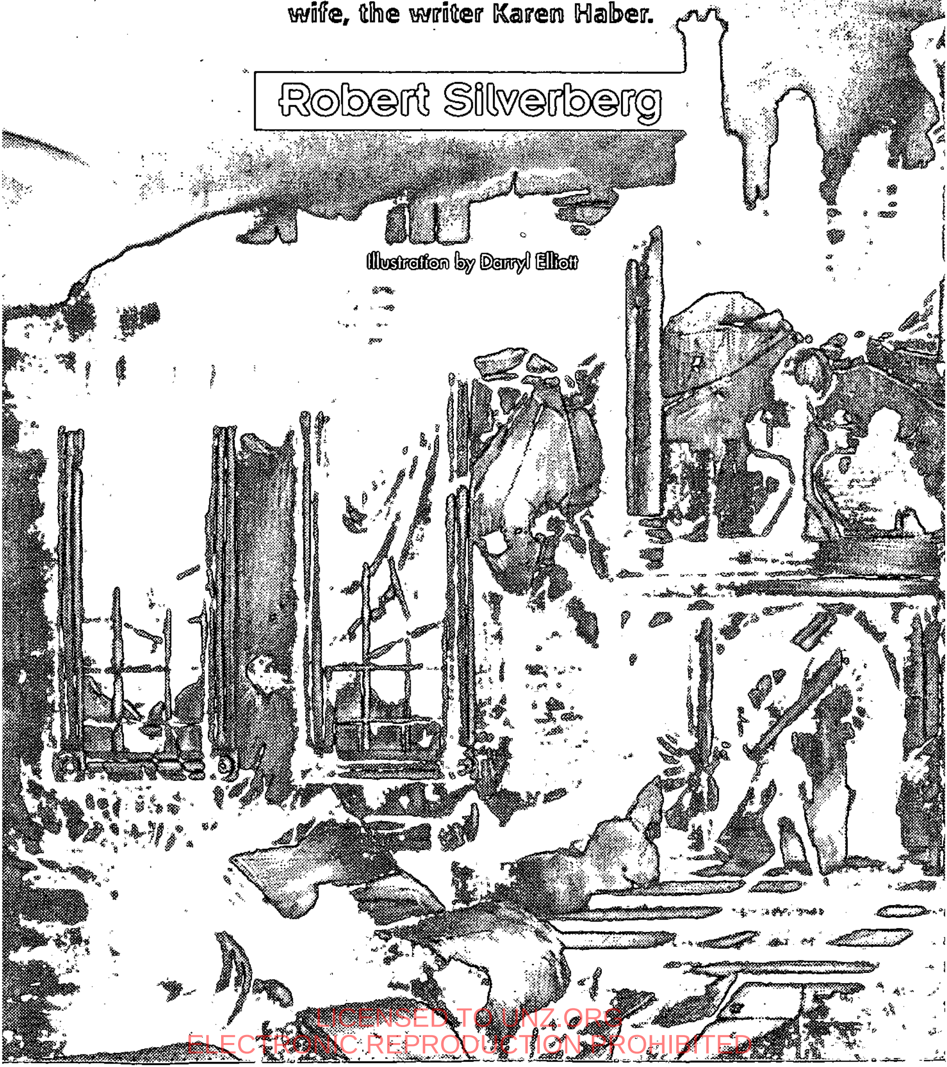

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

The first explosions seemed very far away: a string of distant, muffled bangs, booms, and thuds that might have been nothing more than thunder on the horizon. Joseph, more asleep than not in his comfortable bed in the guest quarters of Getfen House, stirred, drifted a little way up toward wakefulness, cocked half an ear, listened a moment without really listening. Yes, he thought: thunder. His only concern was that thunder might betoken rain, and rain would spoil tomorrow's hunt. But this was supposed to be the middle of the dry season up here in High Manza, was it not? So how could it rain tomorrow?

It was not going to rain, and therefore Joseph knew that what he thought he had heard could not be the sound of thunder—could not, in fact, be anything at all. It is just a dream, he told himself. Tomorrow will be bright and beautiful, and I will ride out into the game preserve with my cousins of High Manza and we will have a glorious time.

He slipped easily back to sleep. An active fifteen-year-old boy is able to dissolve into slumber without effort at the end of day.

But then came more sounds, sharper ones, insistent hard-edged pops and cracks, demanding and getting his attention. He sat up, blinking, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles. Through the darkness beyond his window came a bright flash of light that did not in any way have the sharpness or linearity of lightning. It was more like a blossom unfolding, creamy yellow at the center, purplish at the edges. Joseph was still blinking at it in surprise when the next burst of sound erupted, this one in several phases, a low rolling roar followed by a sudden emphatic boom followed by a long, dying rumble, a slow subsiding. He went to the window, crouching by the sill and peering out.

Tongues of red flame were rising across the way, over by Getfen House's main wing. Flickering shadows climbing the great gray stone wall of the façade told him that the building must be ablaze. That was incredible, that Getfen House could be on fire. He saw figures running to and fro, cutting across the smooth, serene expanse of the central lawn with utter disregard for the delicacy of the close-cropped turf. He heard shouting and the sound, unmistakable and undeniable now, of gunfire. He saw other fires blazing toward the perimeter of the estate, four, five, maybe six of them. A new one flared up as he watched. The outbuildings over on the western side seemed to be on fire, and the rows of haystacks toward the east, and perhaps the field-hand quarters near the road that led to the river.

It was a bewildering, incomprehensible scene. Getfen House was under attack, evidently. But by whom, and why?

He watched, fascinated, as though this were some chapter out of his history books come to life, a reenactment of the Conquest, perhaps, or even some scene from the turbulent, half-mythical past of the Mother World itself, where for thousands of years, so it was said, clashing empires had made the ancient streets of that distant planet run crimson with blood.

The study of history was oddly congenial to Joseph. There was a kind of poetry in it for him. He had always loved those flamboyant tales of far-off strife, the carefully preserved legends of the fabled kings and kingdoms of Old Earth. But they were just tales to him, gaudy legends, ingenious dramatic fictions. He did not seriously think that men like Agamemnon and Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan had ever existed. No doubt life on Old Earth in primitive times had been a harsh, bloody affair, though probably not quite as bloody as the myths that had survived from that remote era suggested; but everyone was quite sure that the qualities that had made such bloodshed possible had long since been bred out of the human race. Now, though, Joseph found himself peering out his window at actual warfare. He could not take his eyes away. It had not yet occurred to him that he might be in actual danger himself.

All was chaos down below. No moons were in the sky this night; the only illumination came from the flickering fires along the rim of the garden and up the side of the main wing of the house. Joseph struggled to make out patterns in the movements he saw. Bands of men were running up and down the garden paths, yelling, gesticulating furiously to each other. They appeared to be carrying weapons: rifles, mainly, but some of them just pitchforks or scythes. Now and again one of the riflemen would pause, drop to one knee, aim, fire into the darkness.

Some of the animals seemed to be loose now, too. Half a dozen of the big racing-bandars from the stable, long-limbed and elegantly slender, were capering wildly about, right in the center of the lawn, prancing and bucking as though driven mad by panic. Through their midst moved shorter, slower, bulkier shapes, stolid shadowy forms that most likely were the herd of dairy ganuilles, freed of their confinement. They were grazing placidly, unconcerned by the erupting madness all about them, on the rare shrubs and flowers of the garden. The house-dogs, too, were out and yelping: Joseph saw one leap high toward the throat of one of the running men, who without breaking stride swept it away with a fierce stroke of his scythe.

Joseph, staring, continued to wonder what was happening here, and could not arrive at even the hint of an answer.

One Great House would not attack another. That was a given. The Masters of Homeworld were bound, all of them, by an unbreakable webwork of kinship. Never in the long centuries since the Conquest had any Master struck a blow against another, not for anger's sake, not for greed's.

Nor was it possible that the Indigenes, weary after thousands of years of the occupation of their world by settlers from Old Earth, had decided finally to take back their planet. They were innately unwarlike, were the Indigenes: trees would sing and frogs would write dictionaries sooner than the Indigenes would begin raising their hands in violence.

Joseph rejected just as swiftly the likelihood that some unknown band of spacefarers had landed in the night to seize the world from its present masters, even as Joseph's own race had seized it from the Folk so long ago. Such things might have happened two or three thousand years before, but the worlds of the Imperium were too tightly bound by sacred treaties now, and the movements of any sort of hostile force through the interstellar spaces would quickly be detected and halted.

His orderly mind could offer only one final hypothesis: that this was an uprising at long last of the Folk against the Masters of House Getfen. That was the least unlikely theory of the four, not at all impossible, merely improbable. This was a prosperous estate. What grievances could exist here? In any case the relationship of Folk to Masters everywhere was a settled thing; it benefited both groups; why would anyone want to destabilize a system that worked so well for everyone?

That he could not say. But flames were licking the side of Getfen House tonight, and barns were burning, and livestock was being set free, and angry men were running to and fro, shooting at people. The sounds of conflict did not cease: the sharp report of gunfire, the dull booming of explosive weapons, the sudden ragged screams of victims whose identity he did not know.

He began to dress. Very likely the lives of his kinsmen here in Getfen House were in peril, and it was his duty to go to their aid. Even if this were indeed a rebellion of the Folk against the Getfens, he did not think that he himself would be at any risk. He was no Getfen, really, except by the most tenuous lines of blood. He belonged to House Keilloran. He was only a guest here, a visitor from Helikis, the southern continent, ten thousand miles away. Joseph did not even look much like a Getfen. He was taller and more slender than Getfen boys of his age, duskier of skin, as southerners tended to be, dark-eyed where Getfen eyes were bright blue, dark-haired where Getfens were golden. No one would attack him. There was no reason why they should.

Before he left his room and entered the chaos outside, though, Joseph felt impelled by habit and training to report the events of the night, at least as he understood them thus far, to his father at Keilloran House. By the yellow light of the next bomb-burst Joseph located his combinant where he had set it down at the side of his bed, thumbed its command button, and waited for the blue globe betokening contact to take form in the air before him.

The darkness remained unbroken. No blue globe formed.

Strange. Perhaps there was some little problem with the circuit. He nudged the "off" button and thumbed the initiator command again. In the eye of his mind he tracked the electrical impulse as it leaped skyward, connected with the satellite station overhead, and was instantly relayed southward. Normally it took no more than seconds for the combinant to make contact anywhere in the world. Not now, though.

"Father?" he said hopefully, into the darkness before his face. "Father, it's Joseph. I can't see your globe, but maybe we're in contact anyway. It's the middle of the night at Getfen House, and I want to tell you that some sort of attack is going on, that there have been explosions, and rifle shots, and—"

He paused. He could hear a soft knocking at the door.

"Master Joseph?" A woman's voice, low, hoarse. "Are you awake, Master Joseph? Please. Please, open."

A servant, it must be. She was speaking the language of the Folk. He let her wait. Staring into the space where the blue globe should have been, he said, "Father, can you hear me? Can you give me any sort of return signal?"

"Master Joseph—please—there's very little time. This is Thustin. I will take you to safety."

Thustin. The name meant nothing to him. She must belong to the Getfens. He wondered why none of his own people had come to him yet. Was this some sort of trap?

But she would not go away, and his combinant did not seem to be working. Mystery upon mystery upon mystery. Cautiously he opened the door a crack.

She stared up at him, almost worshipfully.

"Master Joseph," she said. "Oh, sir—"

Thustin, he remembered now, was his chambermaid—a short, blocky woman who wore the usual servant garb, a loose linen shirt over a half-length tunic of brown leather. To Joseph she seemed old, fifty or so, perhaps sixty. With the women of the Folk it was hard to tell ages. She was thick through from front to back and side to side as Folk often were, practically cubical in shape. Ordinarily she was a quiet, steady sort of woman, who usually came and went without attracting his notice, but she was animated now by distress. Her heavy-jowled face was sallow with shock, and her eyes had taken on an unnerving fluttering motion, as if they were rolling about free in their sockets. Her lips, thin and pale, were trembling. She was carrying a servant's gray cloak over one arm, and thrust it toward him, urgently signaling to him to put it on.

"What's happening?" Joseph asked, speaking Folkish.

"Jakkirod and his men are killing everyone. They'll kill you too, if you don't come with me. Now!"

Jakkirod was the estate foreman, a big hearty red-haired man—tenth generation in Getfen service, according to Gryilin Master Getfen, Joseph's second cousin, who ruled here. A pillar of the house staff, Jakkirod was, said Gryilin Master Getfen. Joseph had seen Jakkirod only a few days before, lifting an enormous log that had somehow fallen across the mouth of a well, tossing it aside as if it were a straw. Jakkirod had looked at Joseph and smiled, an easy, self-satisfied smile, and winked. That had been strange, that wink.

Though he was bubbling over with questions, Joseph found his little hip-purse and began automatically to stuff it with the things he knew he ought not to leave behind in his room. The combinant, of course, and the reader on which his textbooks were stored, and his utility case, which was full of all manner of miniature devices for wayfarers that he had rarely bothered to inspect but which might very well come in handy now, wherever he might be going. That took care of the basics. He tried to think of other possessions that might be important to take along, but, though he still felt relatively calm and clear-headed, he had no idea where he might be heading from here, or for how long, or what he would really need, and Thustin's skittery impatience made it hard for him to think in any useful way. She was tugging at his sleeve, now.

"Why are you here?" he asked, abruptly. "Where are my own servants? Balbus—Anceph—Rollin—?"

"Dead," she said, a husky voice, barely audible. "You will see them lying downstairs. I tell you, they are killing everyone."

Belief was still slow to penetrate him. "The Master Getfen and his sons? And his daughter too?"

"Dead. Everyone dead."

That stunned him, that the Getfens might be dead. Such a thing was almost unthinkable, that Folk would slay members of one of the Great Houses. Such a thing had never happened in all the years since the Conquest. But was it true? Had she seen the actual corpses? No doubt something bad was happening here, but surely it was only a wild rumor that the Getfens were dead. Let that be so, he thought, and muttered a prayer under his breath.

But when he asked her for some sort of confirmation, Thustin only snorted. "Death is everywhere tonight," she told him. "They have not reached this building yet, but they will in just a little while. Will you come, Master Joseph? Because if you do not, you will die, and I will die with you."

He was obstinate. "Have all the Folk of House Getfen rebelled, then? Are you one of the rebels too, Thustin? And are you trying to lead me to my death?"

"I am too old for rebellions, Master Joseph. I serve the Getfens, and I serve their kin. Your lives are sacred to me." There was another explosion outside; from the corner of his eye Joseph saw a frightful burst of blue-white flame spurting up rooftop-high. A volley of cheers resounded from without. No screams, only cheers. They are blowing the whole place up now, he thought. And Thustin, standing like a block of meat before him, had silently begun to weep. By the furious flaring light of the newest fire he saw the shining silvery trails of moisture running down her grayish, furrowed cheeks, and he knew that she had not come to him on any mission of treachery.

Joseph slipped the cloak on, pulled the hood up over his head, and followed her from the room.

The brick building that served as the guest quarters of Getfen House was in fact the original mansion of the Getfens, a thousand or fifteen hundred years old, probably quite grand in its day but long since dwarfed by the present stone-walled mansion-house that dominated the north and east sides of the quadrangle surrounding the estate's sprawling central greensward. Joseph's room was on the third floor. A great ornate staircase done in medieval mode, with steps of pink granite and a balustrade of black wood bedecked every foot or two with ornamental knurls and sprigs and bosses, led to the great hall at ground level. But on the second landing Thustin guided him through a small door that opened onto the grand staircase and drew him down a set of unglamorous back stairs that he knew nothing about, descending two more flights to a part of the building that lay somewhere below ground level. It was musty and dank here. They were in a sort of tunnel. There were no lights anywhere, but Thustin seemed to know her way.

"We must go outside for a moment now," she said. "There will be risk. Say nothing if we are stopped."

At the end of the tunnel was a little stone staircase that took them back up to the surface level. They emerged into a grassy side courtyard that lay between the rear face of the main building and the guest quarters.

The cool night air was harsh with the smells of burning things. Bodies were strewn about like discarded toys. It was necessary to step over them. Joseph could barely bring himself to look into their faces, fearing that he would see his cousin Wykkin lying here, or Dorian, or, what would be much worse, their beautiful sister Kesti who had been so flirtatious with him only yesterday, or perhaps even Master Gryilin himself, the lord of House Getfen. But these were all Folk bodies lying here, servants of the House. Joseph supposed that they had been deemed guilty of excessive loyalty to the Masters; or perhaps they had been slain simply as part of some general settling of old domestic scores once Jakkirod had let loose the forces of rebellion.

Through a gate that stood open at the corner of the courtyard Joseph saw the bodies of his own servants lying outside in a welter of blood: Balbus his tutor, and Anceph, who had shown him how to hunt, and the bluff, hearty coachman, Rollin. It was impossible for Joseph to question the fact that they were dead. He was too well bred to weep for them, and too wary to cry out in roars of anger and outrage, but he was shaken by the sight of those three bodies as he had never before been shaken by anything in his life, and only his awareness of himself as a Master, descended from a long line of Masters, permitted him to keep his emotions under control. Masters must never weep before servants; Masters must never weep at all, if they could help it. Balbus had taught him that life is ultimately tragic for everyone, even for Masters, and that was altogether natural and normal and universal, and must never be decried. Joseph had nodded then as though he understood with every fiber of his being, and at the moment he thought that he had; but now Balbus was lying right over there in a heap with his throat slit, having committed no worse a sin than being tutor of natural philosophy to a young Master, and it was not all that easy for Joseph to accept such a thing with proper philosophical equanimity.

Thustin took him on a diagonal path across the courtyard, heading for a place where there was a double-sided wooden door, set flush with the ground, just at the edge of Getfen House's foundation. She lifted the right-hand side of the door and brusquely beckoned to Joseph to descend. A passageway opened before him, and yet another stairway. He could see candlelight flickering somewhere ahead. The sound of new explosions came to him from behind, a sound made blurred and woolly by all these levels of the building that lay between them and him.

Halting at the first landing, Joseph allowed Thustin to overtake him and lead him onward. Narrow, dimly lit tunnels spread in every direction, a baffling maze. This was the basement of the main house, he assumed, an antique musty world beneath the world, the world of the Getfen servants, a place of the Folk. Unerringly Thustin moved along from one passage to another until at last they reached a chilly candlelit chamber, low-roofed but long, where fifteen or twenty of the Getfen house-Folk sat huddled together around a bare wooden table. They all had a dazed, terrified look. Most were women, and most of those were of Thustin's age. There were a few very old men, and one youngish one propped up on crutches, and some children. Joseph saw no one who might have been capable of taking part in the rebellion. These were noncombatants, cooks and laundrymaids and aged bodyservants and footmen, all of them frightened refugees from the bloody tumult going on upstairs.

Joseph's presence among them upset them instantly. Half a dozen of them surrounded Thustin, muttering harshly and gesticulating. It was hard for Joseph to make out what they were saying, for, although like all Masters he was fluent in Folkish as well as the Master tongue and the Indigene language also, the northern dialect these people used was unfamiliar to him and when they spoke rapidly and more than one spoke at once, as they were doing now, he quickly lost the thread of their words. But their general meaning seemed clear enough. They were angry with Thustin for having brought a Master into their hiding place, even a strange Master who was not of House Getfen, because the rebels might come looking for him down here and, if they did, they would very likely put them all to death for having given him refuge.

"He is not going to stay among you," Thustin answered them, when they were quiet enough to allow her a reply. "I will be taking him outside as soon as I collect some food and wine for our journey."

"Outside?" someone asked. "Have you lost your mind, Thustin?"

"His life is sacred. Doubly so, for he is not only a Master but a guest of this House. He must be escorted to safety."

"Let his own servants escort him, then," said another, sullenly. "Why should you risk yourself in this, can you tell me that?"

"His own people are dead," Thustin said, and offered no other explanation of her decision. Her voice had become deep, almost mannish. She stood squarely before the others, a blocky, defiant figure. "Give me that pack," she told one woman who sat with a cloth-sided carryall on the table before her. Thustin dumped its contents out: clothes, mainly, and some tawdry beaded necklaces. "Who has bread? Meat? And who has wine? Give it to me." They were helpless before the sudden authority of this short plump woman. She had found a strength that perhaps even she had not known she possessed. Thustin went around the room, taking what she wanted from them, and gestured to Joseph. "Come, Master Joseph. There is little time to waste."

"Where are we going, then?"

"Into Getfen Park, and from there to the open woods, where I think you will be safe. And then you must begin making your journey home."

"My journey home?" he said blankly. "My home is ten thousand miles from here!"

He meant it to sound as though it was as far away as one of the moons. But the number obviously meant nothing to her. She merely shrugged and made a second impatient gesture. "They will kill you if they find you here. They are like wolves, now that they have been set loose. I would not have your death on my soul. Come, boy! Come now!"

Still Joseph halted. "I must tell my father what is happening here. They will send people to rescue me and save House Getfen from destruction." And he drew the combinant from his purse and thumbed its command button again, waiting for the blue globe to appear and his father's austere, thin-lipped face to glow forth within it, but once again there was no response.

Thustin clamped her lips together and shook her head in annoyance. "Put your machine away, boy. There is no strength in it any more. Surely the first thing they did was to blow up the relay stations." He noticed that she had begun calling him *boy,* suddenly, instead of the reverential "Master Joseph." And what was that about blowing up relay stations? He had never so much as considered the possibility that the communications lines that spanned the world were vulnerable. You touched your button, your signal went up into space and came down somewhere else on Homeworld, and you saw the face of the person with whom you wanted to speak. It was that simple. You took it for granted that the image would always be there as soon as you summoned it. It had never occurred to him that under certain circumstances it might not be. Was it really that simple to disrupt the combinant circuit? Could a few Folkish malcontents actually cut him off from contact with his family with a couple of bombs?

But this was no moment for pondering whys and wherefores. He was all alone, half a world way from his home, and he was plainly in danger; this old woman, for whatever reason, was planning to guide him to a safer place than he was in right now; any further delay would be foolish.

She put the heavy pack between her shoulders, turned, plodded down toward the far end of the long room. Joseph followed her. They went through a rear exit, down more drafty passageways, doubled back as though she had taken a false turn, and eventually reached yet another staircase that went switching up and up until it brought them to a broad landing culminating in a massive iron-bound doorway that stood slightly ajar. Thustin nudged it open a little further and peeped into whatever lay beyond. Almost at once she pulled her head swiftly backward, like a sand-baron pulling its head into its shell, but after a moment she looked again, and signaled to him without looking back. They tiptoed through, entering a stone-paved hallway that must surely be some part of the main house. There was smoke in the air here, an acrid reek that made Joseph's eyes sting, but the structure itself was intact: Getfen House was so big that whole wings of it could be on fire and other sections would go untouched.

Hurriedly Thustin took him down the hallway, through an arched door, up half a flight of stairs—he had given up all hope of making sense of the route—and then, very suddenly, they were out of the building and in the forest that lay behind it.

It was not a truly wild forest. The trees, straight and tall, were arrayed in careful rows, with wide avenues between them. These trees had been planted, long ago, to form an ornamental transition to the real woods beyond. This was Getfen Park, the hunting preserve of House Getfen, where later today Joseph and his cousins Wykkin and Dorian were to have gone hunting. It was still the middle of the dark moonless night, but by the red light from the buildings burning behind him Joseph saw the tall trees at his sides meeting in neat overhead bowers with the bright hard dots of stars peeping between them, and then the dark mysterious wall of the real woods not far beyond.

"Quickly, quickly," Thustin murmured. "If there's anyone standing sentinel on the roof up there, he'd be able to see us." And hardly had she said that but there were two quick cracks of gunfire behind them, and—was it an illusion?—two red streaks of flame zipping through the air next to him. They began to run. There was a third shot, and a fourth, and at the fourth one Thustin made a little thick-throated sound and stumbled and nearly fell, halting and dropping to one knee instead for a moment before picking herself up and moving along. Joseph ran alongside her, forcing himself to match her slow pace although his legs were much longer than hers.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Were you hit?"

"It only grazed me," she said. "Run, boy! Run!"

She did not seem really to know which way to go out here, and she seemed under increasing strain besides, her breathing growing increasingly harsh and ragged and her stride becoming erratic. He began to think that she had in fact been wounded. In any case Joseph was beginning to see that he should have been the one to carry that pack, but it had not occurred to him to offer, since a Master did not carry packs in the presence of a servant, and she probably would not have permitted it anyway. Nor would she permit it now. But no further shots came after them, and soon they were deep in the wilder part of the game preserve, where no one was likely to come upon them at this hour.

He could hear the sound of gurgling water ahead, no doubt coming from one of the many small streams that ran through the park. They reached it moments later. Thustin unslung her pack, grunting in relief, and dropped down on both knees beside the water. Joseph watched in surprise as she pulled her shirt up from under her tunic and cast it aside, baring the whole upper part of her body. Her breasts were heavy, low-slung, big-nippled. He had very rarely seen breasts before. And even by starlight alone he was able to make out the bloody track that ran along the thick flesh of her left shoulder from its summit to a point well down her chest.

"You *were* hit," he said. "Let me see."

"What can you see, here in the dark?"

"Let me see," Joseph said, and knelt beside her, gingerly touching two fingertips to her shoulder and probing the wounded area as lightly as he could. There seemed to be a lot of blood. It ran down freely over his hand. There is Folkish blood on me, he thought. It was an odd sort of thought. He put his fingers to his lips and tasted it, sweet and salty at the same time. "Am I hurting you?" Joseph asked. Her only response was an indistinct one, and he pressed a little more closely. "We need to clean this," he said, and he fumbled around until he found her discarded shirt in the darkness, and dipped the edge of it in the stream and dabbed it carefully about on both sides of the wound, mopping away the blood. But he could feel new blood welling up almost at once. The wound will have to be bound, he thought, and allowed to clot, and then, at first light, he would take a good look at it and see what he might try to do next, and—

"We are facing south," she said. "You will cross the stream and keep going through the park, until you reach the woods. Beyond the woods there is a village of Indigenes. You speak their language, do you?"

"Of course. But what about—"

"They will help you, I think. Tell them that you are a stranger, a person from far away who wants only to get home. Say that there has been some trouble at Getfen House, where you were a guest. Say no more than that. They are gentle people. They will be kind to you. They will not care whether you are Master or Folk. They will lead you to the nearest house of Masters south of here. Its name is Ludbrek House."

"Ludbrek House. And how far is that?"

"I could not say. I have never in all my life left the domain of House Getfen. The Ludbreks are kinsmen of Master Getfen, though. Heaven grant that they are safe. If you tell them you are a Master, they will help you reach your own home."

"Yes. That they surely will." He knew nothing of these Ludbreks, but all Masters were kinsmen, and he was altogether certain that no one would refuse aid to the wandering eldest son of Martin Master Keilloran of House Keilloran. It went without saying. Even here in far-off High Manza, ten thousand miles to the north, any Master would have heard of Martin Master Keilloran of House Keilloran and would do for his son that which was appropriate. By his dark hair and dark eyes they would recognize him as a southerner, and by his demeanor they would know that he was of Master blood.

"Until you come to Ludbrek House, tell no one you encounter that you are a Master yourself—few here will be able to guess it, because you look nothing like the Masters we know, but best to keep the truth to yourself anyway—and as you travel stay clear of Folk as much as you can, for this uprising of Jakkirod's may reach well beyond these woods already. That was his plan, you know, to spread the rebellion far and wide, to overthrow the Masters entirely, at least in Manza. —Go, now. Soon it will be dawn and you would not want the forest wardens to find you here."

"You want me to leave you?"

"What else can you do, Master Joseph? I am useless to you now, and worse than useless. If I go with you, I'll only slow you down, and very likely I'll bleed to death in a few days even if we are not caught, and my body will be a burden to you. I will go back to Getfen House and tell them that I was hurt in the darkness and confusion, and they will bind my wound, and if no one who saw us together says anything, Jakkirod will let me live. But you must go. If you are found here in the morning, you will die. It is the plan to kill all the Masters, as I have just told you. To undo the Conquest, to purge the world of you and your kind. It is a terrible thing. I did not think they were serious when they began speaking of it. —Go, now, boy! *Go!*"

He hesitated. It seemed like an abomination to abandon her here, bleeding and probably half in shock, while he made his way on his own. He wanted to minister to her wound. He knew a little about doctoring; medicine was one of his father's areas of knowledge, a pastime of his, so to speak, and Joseph had often watched him treating the Folk who belonged to House Keilloran. But she was right: if she went with him she would not only hinder his escape but almost certainly would die from loss of blood in another day or two. If she turned back now, and slipped quietly into Getfen House by darkness, she would probably be able to get help. And in any case Getfen House was her home. The land beyond the woods was as strange to her as it was going to be to him.

So he leaned forward and, with a spontaneity that astounded him and brought a gasp of shock and perhaps even dismay from her, he kissed her on her cheek, and squeezed her hand, and then he got to his feet and slipped the pack over his back and stepped lightly over the little brook, heading south, setting out alone on his long journey home.

He realized that he was, very likely, somewhat in a state of shock himself. Bombs had gone off, Getfen House was burning, his cousins and his servants had been butchered as they slept, he himself had escaped only by grace of a serving-woman's sense of obligation, and now, only an hour or two later, he was alone in a strange forest in the middle of the night, a continent and a half away from House Keilloran: how could he possibly have absorbed all of that so soon? He knew that he had inherited his father's lucidity of mind, that he was capable of quick and clear thinking and handled himself well in challenging situations, a true and fitting heir to the responsibilities of his House. But just how clearly am I thinking right now? he wondered. His first impulse, when the explosions had awakened him, had been to run to the defense of his Getfen cousins. He would be dead by now if he had done that. Even after he had realized the futility of that initial reaction, some part of him had wanted to believe that he could somehow move unharmed through the midst of the insurrection, because the target of the rebels was House Getfen, and he was a stranger, a mere distant kinsman, a member of a House that held sway thousands of miles from here, with whom Jakkirod and his men could have no possible quarrel. He did not even look like a Getfen. At least to some degree he had felt, while the bombs were going off and the bullets were flying through the air and even afterward, that he could simply sit tight amongst the carnage and wait for rescuers to come and take him away, and the rebels would just let him be. But that too was idiocy, Joseph saw. In the eyes of these rebels all Masters must be the enemy, be they Getfens or Ludbreks or the unknown Keillorans and Van Rhyns and Martylls of the Southland. This was a war, Homeworld's first since the Conquest itself, and the district where he was now was enemy territory, land that was apparently under the control of the foes of his people.

How far would he have to go before he reached friendly territory again?

He could not even guess. This might be an isolated uprising, confined just to the Getfen lands, or it might have been a carefully coordinated onslaught that took in the entire continent of Manza, or even Manza and Helikis both. For all he knew he was the only Master still left alive anywhere on Homeworld this night, though that was a thought too terrible and monstrous to embrace for more than a moment. He could not believe that the Folk of House Keilloran would ever rise against his father, or, for that matter, that any of the Folk of any House of Helikis would ever strike a blow against any Master. But doubtless Gryilin Master Getfen and his sons Wykkin and Dorian had felt the same way about their own Folk, and Gryilin and Wykkin and Dorian were dead now, and—this was a new thought, and an appalling one—the lovely Mistress Kesti of the long golden hair must be dead as well, perhaps after suffering great indignities. How many other Masters had died this night, he wondered, up and down the length and breadth of Homeworld?

As Joseph walked on and on, following his nose southward like a sleepwalker, he turned his thoughts now to the realities of the task ahead of him.

He was fifteen, tall for his age, a stalwart boy, but a boy none the less. Servants of his House had cared for him every day of his life. There had always been food, a clean bed, a fresh set of clothes. Now he was alone, weaponless, on foot, trudging through the darkness of a mysterious region of a continent he knew next to nothing about. He wanted to believe that there would be friendly Indigenes just beyond these woods who would convey him obligingly to Ludbrek House, where he would be greeted like a long-lost brother, taken in and bathed and fed and sheltered, and after a time sent on his way by private flier to his home in Helikis. But what if the Ludbreks, too, were dead? What if all Masters were, everywhere in the continent of Manza?

That thought would not leave him, that the Folk of the north, striking in coordinated fashion all in a single night, had killed every member of every Great House of Manza.

And if they had? If there was no one anywhere to help him along in his journey?

Was he, he asked himself, supposed to *walk* from here to the Isthmus, five or six thousand miles, providing for himself the whole way? How long might it take to walk five thousand miles? At twenty miles a day, day in and day out—was such a pace possible, he wondered?—it would take, what, two hundred fifty days. And then he would have five thousand miles more to go, from the Isthmus to Keilloran. At home they would long ago have given him up for dead, by the time he could cover so great a distance. His father would have mourned for him, and his sisters and his brothers. They would have draped the yellow bunting over the gate of Keilloran House, they would have read the words for the dead, they would have put up a stone for him in the family burial-ground. As well they should, because how was he to survive such a journey, anyway? Clever as he was, quick and strong as he was, he was in no way fitted for month after month of foraging in the wilderness that was the heart of this raw, half-settled continent.

These, Joseph told himself, were useless thoughts. He forced them from his mind.

He kept up a steady pace, hour after hour. The forest was dense and the ground uneven and the night very dark, and at times the going was difficult, but he forged ahead notwithstanding, dropping ultimately into a kind of automatic robotic stride, a mindless machinelike forward movement that made a kind of virtue out of his growing fatigue. His progress was punctuated by some uneasy moments, mysterious rustlings and chitterings in the underbrush, and a couple of times he heard the sound of some large animal crashing around nearby. From the multitude of things in his utility case Joseph selected a cutting-tool, small but powerful, and sliced a slender stem from a sturdy many-branched shrub, and used the utility's blade to whittle it into a stick to carry as he walked. That provided some little measure of reassurance. In a little while the first pale light of dawn came through the treetops, and, very tired now, he halted under a great red-boled tree and went rummaging through the pack that Thustin had assembled for him to see what sort of provisions she had managed to collect from the assembled Folk in that underground chamber.

It was Folkish food, rough simple stuff. But that was only to be expected. A long lopsided loaf of hard grayish bread, a piece of cold meat, pretty gray also, some lumpy biscuits, a flask of dark wine. She had particularly asked for wine. Why was that? Did the Folk think of wine as a basic beverage of life? Joseph tasted it: dark and sour, it was, a sharp edge on it, nothing whatever like the velvety wine of his father's table. But after his first wince he became aware of the welcome warmth of it on the way down. The air here in early morning was cold. Gusts of ghostly fog wandered through the forest. He took another sip and contemplated a third. But then he put the stopper back in and went to work on the bread and meat.

Soon he moved along. He wanted nothing more than to curl up under a bush and close his eyes—he had had only an hour or two of sleep and at his age he needed a good deal more than that, and the strain and shock of the night's events were exacting their toll now—but it was a wise idea, Joseph knew, to put as much distance as he could between himself and what might be taking place back at Getfen House.

His notion of where he was right now was hazy. In the three weeks he had spent at Getfen House his cousins had taken him riding several times in the park, and he was aware that the game preserve itself, stocked with interesting beasts and patrolled against poachers by wardens of the House, shaded almost imperceptibly into the untrammeled woods beyond. But whether he was still in the park or had entered the woods by now was something that he had no way of telling.

One thing that he feared was that in the darkness he had unknowingly looped around and headed back toward the house. But that did not seem to be the case. Now that the sun had risen, he saw that it stood to his left, so he must surely be heading south. Even in this northern continent, where everything seemed upside down to him, the sun still rose in the east. A glance at the compass that he found in his utility case confirmed that. And the wind, blowing from his rear, brought him occasional whiffs of bitter smoke that he assumed came from the fire at Getfen House.

There came a thinning of the forest, which led Joseph to think that he might be leaving the woods and approaching the village of Indigenes that Thustin had said lay on the far side.

She had said nothing about a highway, though. But there was one, smack in his path, and he came upon it so suddenly, moving as he was now in such a rhythmic mechanical way, that he nearly went stumbling out onto the broad grassy verge that bordered it before he realized what he was looking at, which was a four-lane road, broad and perfectly straight, emerging out of the east and vanishing toward the westward horizon, a wide strip of black concrete that separated the woods out of which he had come from a further section of forest just in front of him like a line drawn by a ruler.

For a moment, only a moment, Joseph believed that the road was devoid of traffic and he could safely dart across and lose himself among the trees on the other side. But very quickly he came to understand his error. This present silence and emptiness betokened only a fortuitous momentary gap in the activity on this highway. He heard a rumbling off to his left that quickly grew into a tremendous pulsing boom, and then saw the snouts of the first vehicles of an immense convoy coming toward him, a line of big trucks, some of them gray-green, some black, flanked by armed outriders on motorcycles. Joseph pulled back into the woods just in time to avoid being seen.

There, stretched out flat on his belly between two bushes, he watched the convoy go by: big trucks first, then lighter ones, vans, canvas-covered farm wagons, vehicles of all sorts, all of them pounding away with ferocious vehemence toward some destination in the west. Instantly a burst of hopeful conviction grew in him that this must be a punitive force sent by one of the local Great Houses to put down the uprising that had broken out on the Getfen lands, but then he realized that the motorcycle outriders, though they were helmeted and carried rifles, did not wear the uniforms of any formal peacekeeping-force but rather were clad in a hodgepodge of Folkish dress, jerkins, doublets, overalls, tunics, the clothing of a peasantry that had abruptly been transformed into an improvised militia.

A shiver ran through him from nape of neck to base of spine. He understood completely now that what had happened at Getfen House was no mere outburst of wrath directed at one particular family of Masters by one particular band of disgruntled Folk. This was true war, total war, carefully planned and elaborately equipped, the Folk of High Manza against the Masters of High Manza, perhaps spreading over many provinces, perhaps over the entire northern continent. The first blows had been struck during the night by Jakkirod and his like, swingers of scythes and wielders of pitchforks, but armed troops were on the way to follow up on the initial strike.

Joseph lay mesmerized, horror-stricken. He could not take his eyes from the passing force. As the procession was nearing its end one of the outriders happened to turn and look toward the margin of the road just as he went past Joseph's position, and Joseph was convinced that the man had seen him, had stared directly into his eyes, had given him a cold, searching look, baleful and malevolent, bright with hatred, as he sped by. Perhaps not. Perhaps it was only his imagination at work. Still, the thought struck him that the rider might halt and dismount and come in pursuit of him, and he wondered whether he should risk getting to his feet and scrambling back into the forest.

But no, no, the man rode on and did not reappear, and a few moments later one final truck, open-bodied and packed front to back with Folkish troops standing shoulder to shoulder, went rolling by, and the road was empty again. An eerie silence descended, broken only by the strident ticking chirps of a chorus of peg-beetles clinging in congested orange clumps to the twigs of the brush at the edge of the woods.

Joseph waited two or three minutes. Then he crept out onto the grassy margin. He looked to his left, saw no more vehicles coming, looked to his right and found that the last of the convoy was only a swiftly diminishing gray dot in the distance. He raced across and lost himself as fast as he could in the woods on the south side of the road.

As midday approached there was still no sign of the promised Indigene village, or any other sort of habitation, and he knew he had to pause here and get some rest. The cold fogs of dawn had given way to mild morning warmth and then to the dry heat of a summer noon. It seemed to Joseph that this march had lasted for days already, though it could not have been much more than twelve hours since he and Thustin had fled the chaotic scene at Getfen House. There were limits even to the resilience of youth, evidently. The forest here was choked with underbrush and every step was a battle. He was strong and healthy and agile, but he was a Master, after all, a child of privilege, not at all used to this kind of scrambling through rough, scruffy woodlands. Hot as the day now was, he was shivering with weariness. There was a throbbing sensation along his left leg from calf to thigh, and a sharper pain farther down, as though he might have turned his ankle along the way without even noticing. His eyelids felt rough and raw from lack of sleep, his clothes were stained and torn in a couple of places, his throat was dry, his stomach was calling out impatiently for some kind of meal. He settled down in a dip between two clumps of angular, ungainly little trees and made a kind of lunch out of the rest of the bread, as much of the meat as he could force himself to nibble, and half of what was left of his wine.

Another try at contacting House Keilloran got him nowhere. The combinant seemed utterly dead.

The most important thing now seemed to be to halt for a little while and let his strength rebuild itself. He was starting to be too tired to think clearly, and that could be a lethal handicap. The sobering sight of that convoy told him that at any given moment he might find himself unexpectedly amidst enemies, and only the swiftness of his reaction time would save him. It was only a matter of luck that he had not sauntered out onto that highway just as those Folkish troops passed by, and very likely they would have shot him on sight if they had noticed him standing there. Therefore stopping for rest now was not only desirable but necessary. It was probably better to sleep by day and walk by night, anyway. He was less likely to be seen under cover of darkness.

That meant, of course, leaving himself open to discovery while he slept. The idea of simply settling down in bright daylight, unconcealed, stretched out asleep beneath some tree where he could be come upon unawares by any passing farmer or poacher or, perhaps, sentry, seemed far too risky to him. He would have liked to find a cave of some sort and crawl into it for a few hours. But there were no caves in sight and he had neither the will nor the means, just now, to dig a hole for himself. And so in the end he scooped together a mattress of dry leaves and ripped some boughs from the nearby bushes and flung them together in what he hoped was a natural-looking way to form a coverlet, and burrowed down under them and closed his eyes.

Hard and bumpy as the ground was beneath his leaves, he fell asleep easily and dreamed that he was strolling in the gardens of Keilloran House, some part of the garden that he must never have seen before, where strange thick-bellied tree-ferns grew, striking ferns with feathery pinkish-green fronds that terminated in globular structures very much like eyeballs. His father was with him, that splendid princely man, handsome and tall, and also one of Joseph's younger brothers—he could not be sure which one, Rickard or Eitan, they kept wavering from one to the other—and one of his sisters also, who by her height and her flowing cascade of jet hair he knew to be Cailin, closest of all the family to him in age. To his surprise his mother was strolling just ahead of them, the beautiful, stately Mistress Wireille, although in fact she had been dead these three years past. As they all proceeded up the soft pathway of crumbled redshaft bark that ran through the middle of the fern garden, various Folk attached to the House, chamberlains and other high officials, came forth and bowed deeply to them, far more formally and subserviently than his father would ever have tolerated in reality, and as each of the household people went by, some member of the family would hold out a hand to be kissed, not only the Master and Mistress, but the children too, all but Joseph, who found himself snatching back his hand every time it was sought. He did not know why, but he would not allow it, even though it appeared to be a perfectly natural kind of obeisance within the context of the scene. To his surprise his father was angry at his refusal to be greeted in this way, and said something harsh to him, and glared. Even while he dreamed Joseph knew that there was something wrong with that, for it had never been his father's way to speak so harshly to him.

Then the dream faded and was followed by others, more discordant and fragmentary than that one, a jumble of disturbing images and pointless conversations and journeys down long passageways, and then, suddenly, many hours later, he awoke and was bewildered to find himself lying in a shelter made of leafy boughs with the dark starry vault of the night above him, close and heavy. It was a moment before he remembered where he was, and why. He had slept past sundown and on into evening.

The long afternoon's sleep seemed to have cleared Joseph's mind of many of its fears and doubts. He felt ready to move along, to do whatever might be needful to reach his distant home, to walk all the way to Helikis if that was what he had to do. No harm would come to him, of that he was certain—not because he was a Master of the highest rank, which would count for nothing in this hostile wilderness, but because he was quick-witted and resourceful and well fitted by nature and training to deal with whatever challenges might await him.

Though night had arrived, he said the morning prayers. That was permissible, wasn't it? He had just awakened, after all. For him, with day and night now reversed, it was the beginning of a new day. Then he found a pond nearby, stripped and washed himself thoroughly in the cold water, trying to scrub away the stiffness that the long hours lying on the ground had caused, and washed his clothing as well.

While Joseph waited for his clothes to dry he tried yet again to make combinant contact with his father, and once more failed. He had no doubt now that the rebels had managed to damage the worldwide communications system and that he was not going to be able to get any message through to the people of House Keilloran or anyone else. I might just as well throw the combinant away, he thought, although he could not bring himself to do it.

Then he gathered some stubby twigs from the forest floor, arranged them in three small cairns, and offered the words that were due the souls of Balbus, Anceph, and Rollin. That was his responsibility: he had not been able to give their bodies a proper burial, but he must at least do what had to be done to send their souls on their way. They were of Master stock, after all, subordinate in rank but still in a certain sense his kin. And, since they had been good servants, loyal and true to him, the task now fell to him to look after their wandering spirits. He should have done it before going to sleep, he knew, but he had been too tired, too confused, to think of it then. As Joseph finished the third of the three sets of prayers, the ones for Balbus, he was swept for a moment by a powerful sense of loneliness and loss, for Balbus had been a dear man and a wise teacher and Joseph had expected him to go on guiding him until he had passed the threshold of adulthood. One did not look primarily to one's father for guidance of that sort; one looked to one's tutor. Now Balbus was gone, and Joseph was alone not merely in this forest but, in a manner of speaking, in the world as well. It was not quite the same as losing one's father, or one's mother, for that matter, but it was a stunning blow all the same.

The moment passed quickly, though. Balbus had equipped him to deal with losses of all sorts, even the loss of Balbus himself. He stood for a time above the three cairns, remembering little things about Balbus and Anceph and Rollin, a turn of phrase or a way of grinning or how they moved when coming into a room, until he had fixed them forever in his mind as he had known them alive, and not as he had seen them lying bloodied in that courtyard.

Afterward Joseph finished the last of the meat and wine, tucking the round-bellied flask back in his pack to use as a vessel for carrying water thereafter, and set out into the night, checking his compass often to make certain that he was continuing on a southward path in the darkness. He picked his way warily through this dark loamy-smelling wilderness of uneven ground, watching out for straggling roots and sudden declivities, listening for the hissing or clacking of some watchful hostile beast, and prodding with his stick at the thicker patches of soft, rotting leaves before venturing out on them. The leg that he seemed to have injured unawares had stiffened while he slept, and gave him increasing trouble: he feared reinjuring it with a careless step. Sometimes he saw glowing yellow eyes studying him from a branch high overhead, or contemplating him from the safety of a lofty boulder, and he stared boldly back to show that he was unafraid. He wondered, though, whether he should be afraid. He had no notion of what sort of creatures these might be.

Around midnight he heard the sounds of another highway ahead of him, and soon he saw the lights of moving traffic, once more crossing the route he must follow but this time passing from west to east rather than east to west. That seemed odd, so much traffic this late at night: he decided it must be another of the rebels' military convoys, and he approached the break in the forest with extreme caution, not wanting to blunder forth into view and attract some passing rebel's attention.

But when he was close enough to see the road Joseph discovered that its traffic was no grim purposeful convoy of roaring trucks, but a slow, muddled procession of humble peasant conveyances, farm tractors, open carts drawn by animals, flatbed wagons, pushcarts, wheelbarrows. Aboard them, or in some cases pulling or pushing them, was a desperate-looking raggle-taggle horde of Folkish refugees, people who had piled their household belongings and their domestic animals and anything else they could take with them into this collection of improvised vehicles and were, plainly, fleeing as hurriedly as they could from some horrifying catastrophe that was happening in the west. Perhaps that catastrophe was the work of the very convoy Joseph had encountered the day before. As Thustin had already demonstrated, not all the Folk of Getfen House were in sympathy with the rebellion, and Joseph began now to suspect that at some of the Great Houses there could be as many Folkish victims of the uprising as there were Masters—Folk striking out at other Folk. So what was going on, then, might be mere anarchy, rather than a clear-cut revolt of the underclass against its lords. And then a third possibility occurred to him: that the Masters in the west had already put the rebellion down, and were exacting a dread vengeance upon the Folk of their region, and these people were trying to escape their fury. He did not know which possibility he found more frightening.

Joseph waited close to an hour for the refugees to finish going past. Then, when the last few stragglers had disappeared and the road was empty, he sprinted across, heedless of the protests of his aching leg, and plunged into the heavy tangle of brush on the other side.

The hour was growing late, and he was starting to think about finding a safe nest in which to spend the upcoming day when he realized that someone or something was following him.

He was aware of it, first, as a seemingly random crashing or crunching in the underbrush to his rear. That was, he supposed, some animal or perhaps several, moving about on their nightly rounds. Since it was reasonable to expect the forest to be full of wild creatures, and since none of them had presented any threat to him so far, he did not feel any great alarm.

But then, when he halted at a swift little brook to refill his flask with fresh water, he noticed that the crashing sounds had ceased; and when he resumed his march, the sounds were resumed also. After ten minutes he stopped again, and the sounds stopped. He started, and immediately the sounds began again. A foraging animal would not behave that way. But these were not the sounds that any human who might be pursuing him would make, either, for no serious attempt at concealment was being made. Something—something big, Joseph began to think, and probably not very bright—was crashing blithely through the underbrush behind him, tramping along in his wake, matching him step for step, halting when he halted, starting up again when he started.

He had nothing that could serve very well as a weapon: just his flimsy walking-stick, and the little cutting-tools in his utility case, which only a fool would try to use in hand-to-hand combat. But perhaps he would not need any weapon. The rhythmic pattern of the footsteps behind him—crash *crash,* crash *crash,* crash *crash*—made it seem more likely that his follower was a two-legged creature than some low-slung brutish beast of the forest. If there was any truth whatever to Thustin's tale of there being an Indigene village down this way, he might well have entered its territory by now, and this might be a scout from that village, skulking along behind him to see what this human interloper might be up to.

Joseph turned and stared back into the darkness of the forest through which he had just come. He was fairly sure that he could hear the sound of breathing nearby: slow, heavy breathing.

"Who's there?" Joseph asked, saying it in the Indigene tongue.

Silence.

"I call for an answer," Joseph said crisply, still using Indigene. He spoke with the unmistakable tone of a Master. Perhaps that was a mistake, he thought, but there was no helping it now. An Indigene would not care whether he was Master or Folk, anyway.

But still no answer came. He could still hear the sound of hoarse breathing, though. No question about that, now. "I know you're there," said Joseph. "I call on you to identify yourself to me." Only a Master would have spoken that way, and so, when the silence continued, he said it again in Master-speech, to underscore his rank. Then, for good measure, he repeated the words in Folkish. Silence. Silence. He might just as well have called out to the creature in the language of Old Earth, he realized. Joseph had studied that language under Balbus's tutelage and after a fashion could actually speak a little of it.

Then he remembered that there was a pocket torch in his utility case. He groped around for it, drew it out, and switched it on, putting it on widest beam.

A looming massive noctambulo stood before him, no more than twenty feet away, blinking and gaping in the light.

"So you're what's been following me," Joseph said. He spoke in Indigene. He knew that in his home district that was a language noctambulos were capable of understanding. "Well, hello, there." One did not fear noctambulos, at least not those of Helikis. They were huge and potentially could do great damage as they blundered about, but they were innately harmless. "What is it you want with me, will you tell me?"

The noctambulo simply stared at him, slowly opening and closing its long rubbery beak in the silly way that noctambulos had. The creature was gigantic, eight feet tall, maybe nine, with a narrow spindling head, thick huddled shoulders, enormously long arms that culminated in vast paddle-shaped outward-turned hands. Its close-set red eyes, glistening like polished garnets in the diffuse light of Joseph's torch, were saucer-sized. Its body was covered with broad, leathery pinkish-yellow scales. The noctambulos of Helikis were a darker color, almost blue. A regional difference, Joseph thought. Perhaps this was even a different species, though obviously closely related.

"Well?" Joseph said. "Will you speak to me? My name is Joseph Master Keilloran," he said. "Who are you?" And, into the continuing silence: "I know you can understand me. Speak to me. I won't harm you. See? I have no weapons."

"The light—" said the noctambulo. "In my eyes—" Its voice sounded rusty. It was the clanking sound of a machine that had not been used for many years.

"Is that it," Joseph said. "How's this, then?" He lowered the beam, turning it at an angle so he could continue to see the noctambulo without blinding it. The great shambling being flapped its loose-jointed wrists in what might have been a gesture of gratitude.

The noctambulos of Helikis were stupid creatures, just barely across the threshold of intelligence, and there was no reason to think that those of Manza were any cleverer. But they had to be treated as something more than mere animals. They were capable of speaking Indigene, however poorly and inarticulately, and they had some sort of language of their own besides. And they had definite self-awareness, undeniable consciousnesses. Two apiece, indeed, for noctambulos, as their name implied, were creatures that prowled by night, but also remained active during their daytime sleep periods, and, insofar as Joseph understood it, had secondary identities and personalities that came into operation by day while the primary identity that inhabited their brains was sleeping. How much communication existed between the day and night identities of each noctambulo was something that no one had been clearly able to determine.

Intelligence had developed differently on Homeworld than it had on Earth: instead of one dominant species that had subjugated all others, Homeworld had several sorts of native races that qualified as intelligent, each of which had a language and the ability to form abstract concepts and even art of a kind, and the members of which had distinct individual identities. The race known as Indigenes, though they were more nearly humanoid in appearance than any of the others and were undoubtedly the most intelligent, had never shown any impulse toward dominance whatsoever, so that they could not really be regarded as the species that had ruled this world before the first humans came. No one had ruled this world, which had made it much easier for the firstcomers, the humans now known as the Folk, to take possession of it. And, since the Folk had been lulled to placidity after having lived here so long without any hint of challenge from the native lifeforms, that had perhaps made it such an easy matter for the second wave of humans, the conquering Masters, to reduce them to a subordinate position.

Since the noctambulo did not seem to want to explain why it had been following Joseph through the woods, perhaps did not even know itself, Joseph let the point pass. He told the creature, speaking slowly and carefully in Indigene, that he was a solitary traveler searching for a nearby village of Indigenes where he hoped to take refuge from trouble among his own people.

The noctambulo replied—thickly, almost incoherently—that it would do what it could to help.

There was something dreamlike about conducting a conversation with a noctambulo, but Joseph was glad enough for company of any sort after the unaccustomed solitude of his sojourn in the forest. He could not remember when he had last been alone for so long: there had always been one of his servants around, or his brothers or his sisters.

They went on their way, the noctambulo in the lead. Joseph had no idea why the creature had been following him through the forest. Probably, he thought, he would never find out. Perhaps it had had no reason at all, simply had fallen in behind the wayfarer in a foolish automatic way. It made little difference.

Before long Joseph felt hunger coming over him. The provisions that

Thustin had given him were all gone now. All he had was the water in his flask. Finishing the last of the meat a few hours before, he had not paused to consider what he would do for meals thereafter on his journey, for he had never had to think about such a thing before. But he thought about it now. In the tales he had read about lone wandering castaways, they had always lived on roots and berries in the forest, or killed small animals with well-aimed rocks. Joseph had no way of knowing how to distinguish the edible roots or berries from the poisonous ones, though, and there did not seem to be any fruit on the trees and shrubs around here anyway at this time of year. As for killing wild animals by throwing rocks at them, that seemed to be something that was possible only in boys' storybooks.

He had to eat something, though. He wondered what he was going to do. From minute to minute the pangs increased in intensity. He had always had a hearty appetite. And in the short while since his escape from Getfen House he had called mightily on his body's reserves of strength.

It did not occur to him to discuss the problem with the noctambulo. After a couple of hours, however, they came to another small brook, and, since these little forest streams were becoming less common as they proceeded southward, Joseph thought it would be wise to fill his flask once again, even though it was less than half empty. He did so, and knelt also for a deep drink directly from the brook. Afterward he stayed in his crouching position for a few moments, enjoying the simple pleasure of resting here like this. The thought came to him of the clean warm bed in the guest quarters of Getfen House where he had been lying half asleep when the first sounds of the rebellion reached his ears, and of his own comfortable little apartment at home, his bed with its coverlet of purple and gold, his lopsided old chair, his well-stocked bookcase, his tile-bordered washbasin, the robust breakfast that was brought to his door by a servant every morning. All those things seemed like the stuff of dreams to him now. If only this were the dream, Joseph thought, and they were the reality into which he would at any moment awaken.

Finally he looked up and noticed that the noctambulo had moved a short distance upstream from him and was grubbing about intently in the mud of the shore with its great scoop-like hands, prodding and poking in it, dredging up large handfuls of mud that it turned over and over, inspecting them with almost comically deep attention. Joseph perceived that the noctambulo was pulling small many-legged creatures, crustaceans of some sort, from nests eight or nine inches down in the mud. It had found perhaps a dozen of them already, and, as Joseph watched, it scooped up a couple more, deftly giving them a quick pinch apiece to crack their necks and laying them carefully down beside the others.

This went on until it had caught about twenty. It divided the little animals into two approximately equal groups and shoved one of the piles toward Joseph, and said something in its thick-tongued, barely intelligible way that Joseph realized, after some thought, had been, "We eat now."

He was touched by the creature's kindness in sharing its meal unasked with him. But he wondered how he was going to eat these things. Covertly he glanced across at the noctambulo, who had hunkered down at the edge of the stream and was taking up the little mud-crawlers one by one, carefully folding the edges of one big hand over them and squeezing in such a way as to split the horny shell and bring bright scarlet meat popping into view. It sucked each tender morsel free, tossed the now empty shell over its shoulder into the brook, and went on to the next.

Joseph shuddered and fought back a spasm of nausea. The thought of eating such a thing—raw, no less—disgusted him. It would be like eating insects.

But it was clear to him that his choice lay between eating and starving. He knew what he would have said and done if his steward had brought him a tray of these crawlers one morning at Keilloran House. But this was not Keilloran House. Gingerly he picked up one of the mud-crawlers and tried to crack it open with his hand as he had seen the noctambulo do. The chitinous shell, though, was harder than he had expected. Even when he pushed inward with both hands he could not cause it to split.

The noctambulo watched benignly, perhaps pityingly. But it did not offer to help. It went methodically on with its own meal.

Joseph drew his knife from his utility case and by punching down vigorously was able to cut a slit about an inch long into the crawler's shell. That gave him enough of a start so that he now could, by pressing from both ends with all his strength, extend the crack far enough to make the red flesh show.

He stared down at it, quailing at the idea of actually putting this stuff in his mouth. Then, as a sudden wild burst of hunger overwhelmed him and obliterated all inhibition, he quickly lifted it and clamped his lips over the cracked shell and sucked the meat out, gulping it hurriedly down as if he could somehow avoid tasting it that way.

He could not avoid tasting it. The flavor was musky and pungent, as pungent as anything he had ever tasted, a harsh spiky taste that cut right into his palate. It seemed to him that the crawler flesh had the taste of mud in it too, or of the clay that lay below the mud in the bed of the brook. He gagged on it. A powerful shudder ran through him and his stomach seemed to rise and leap about. But after a couple of hasty gulps of water the worst of the sensations quickly subsided, leaving a reasonably tolerable aftertaste, and he realized that that first mouthful of strange meat had somehow taken the hard edge from his hunger. Joseph cracked open a second crawler and ate it less timidly, and a third, and a fourth, until it began to seem almost unremarkable to be eating such things. He still hated the initial muddy taste, nor was there any sort of pleasure for him in the aftertaste, but this was, at least, a way of easing the gripings of hunger. When he had eaten six of the crawlers he decided that he had had enough and pushed the rest of the heap back toward the noctambulo, who gathered them up without comment and set about devouring them.

A dozen or so mud-crawlers could not have been much of a meal for an entity the size of the noctambulo. Indeed, as the two of them went onward through the night, the big creature continued to gather food. It went about the task with considerable skill, too. Joseph watched with unforced admiration as the noctambulo unerringly sniffed out an underground burrow, laid it bare with a few quick scoops of its great paddle-shaped hands, and pounced with phenomenal speed on the frantic inhabitants, a colony of small long-nosed mammals with bright yellow eyes, perhaps of the same sort that Joseph had seen staring down at him the night before. It caught four, killing them efficiently, and laid them out in a row on the ground, once again dividing them in two groups and nudging one pair toward Joseph.

Joseph stared at them, perplexed. The noctambulo had its face deep in the abdomen of one of the little beasts and was already happily gnawing away.

That was something Joseph could not or at least would not do. He could flay them and butcher them, he supposed, but he drew the line, at least this early in his journey, at eating the raw and bloody meat of mammals. Grim-ly he peeled the skin from the limbs of one of the long-nosed animals and then the other, and hacked away at the lean pink flesh along the fragile-looking bones until he had sliced off a fair-sized pile of meat. For the first time he deployed the firestarter from his utility case, using it to kindle a little blaze from twigs and dry leaves, and dangled one strip of meat after another into it from skewers until they were more or less cooked, or at any rate charred on the outside, though disagreeably moist within. Joseph ate them joylessly but without any great difficulty. The meat had little flavor; the effect was certainly that of eating meat, however stringy and drab in texture, but it made scarcely any impact on the tongue. Still, there would be some nourishment here, or so he hoped.

The noctambulo by this time had finished its meat and had excavated some thick crooked white tubers as a second course. These too it divided with Joseph, who began to push a skewer through one of them so he could hold it over the fire.

"No," said the noctambulo. "No fire. Do like this." And bit off a beakful from one without troubling even to brush the crust of soil from its sides. "Is good. You eat."

Joseph fastidiously cleaned the dirt from the tuber as well as he could and took a wary bite. To his surprise the taste was superb. The tuber's soft pulp was fragrant and fruity, and it detonated a complex mixture of responses in his mouth, all of them pleasing—a sugary sweetness, with an interesting winy tartness just behind it, and then a warm, starchy glow. It seemed a perfect antidote to the nastiness of the mud-crawler flesh and the insipidity of the meat of the burrowers. In great delight Joseph finished one tuber and then a second, and was reaching for a third when the noctambulo intervened. "Is too much," it said. "Take with. You eat later." The saucer eyes seemed to be giving him a sternly protective look. It was almost like having Balbus back in a bizarrely altered form.

Soon it would be morning. Joseph began to feel a little sleepy. He had adapted swiftly to this new regime of marching by night and sleeping by day. But the food, and particularly the tubers, had given him a fresh access of strength. He marched on steadily behind the noctambulo through a region that seemed much hillier and rockier than the terrain they had just traversed, and not quite as thickly vegetated, until, as the full blaze of daylight descended on the forest, the noctambulo halted suddenly and said, looking down at him from its great height, "Sleep now."

It was referring to itself, evidently, not to Joseph. And he watched sleep come over it. The noctambulo remained standing, but between one moment and the next *something* had changed. The noctambulo had little ability, so far as Joseph could detect, to register alterations in facial expression, and yet the glint in its huge eyes seemed somehow harder now, and it held its beak tightly closed instead of drooping ajar as it usually did, and the tapering head appeared to be tilted now at an odd quizzical angle.

After a moment Joseph remembered: daytime brought a consciousness shift for noctambulos. The nighttime self had gone to sleep and the daytime personality now was operating the huge body. In the hours just ahead, Joseph realized, he would essentially be dealing with a different noctambulo.

"My name is Joseph Master Keilloran," he felt obliged to announce to it. "I am a traveler who has come here from a far-off place. Your night-self has been guiding me through the forest to the nearest village of Indigenes."

The noctambulo made no response: did not, in fact, seem to comprehend anything Joseph had said, did not react in any way. Very likely it had no recollection of anything its other self had been doing in the night just past. It might not even have a very good understanding of the Indigene language. Or perhaps it was searching through the memories of the nighttime self to discover why it found itself in the company of this unfamiliar being.

"It is nearly my sleeping-time now," Joseph continued. "I must stop here and rest. Do you understand me?"

No immediate answer was forthcoming. The noctambulo continued to stare.

Then it said, brusquely, dispassionately, "You come," and strode off through the forest.

Unwilling to lose his guide, Joseph followed, though he would rather have been searching for a sheltered place in which to spend the daylight hours. The noctambulo did not look back, nor did it accommodate its pace to Joseph's. It might not be guiding Joseph at all any longer, Joseph realized. For an hour or more he forced himself onward, keeping pace with the noctambulo with difficulty, and then he knew he must stop and rest, even if that meant that the daytime noctambulo would go on without him and disappear while he slept. When another stream appeared, the first he had seen in a long while, Joseph halted and drank and made camp for himself beneath a bower of slender trees joined overhead by a dense tangle of aerial vines. The noctambulo did not halt. Joseph watched it vanish into the distance on the far side of the stream.

There was nothing he could do about that. He ate one of his remaining tubers, made another fruitless attempt to use his combinant, offered up the appropriate prayers for bedtime, and settled down for sleep. The ground was rougher and rockier than it looked and it was not easy to find a comfortable position, and the leg that had given him trouble on and off during the march was throbbing again from ankle to knee. For hours, it seemed, he could not get to sleep despite his weariness. But somewhere along the way it must have happened, for a dream came to him in which he and his sister Cailin had been bathing in a mountain lake and he had gone ashore first and mischievously taken her clothes away with him; and then he opened his eyes and saw that night had begun to fall, and that the noctambulo was standing above him, patiently watching.

Was this *his* noctambulo, or the unfriendly daytime self, or a different noctambulo altogether? He could not tell.

But evidently it was his, for the ungainly creature not only had come back to him but had solicitously set out an array of food beside the stream-bank: a little heap of mud-crawlers, and two dead animals the size of small dogs with red fur marked with silvery stripes and short, powerful-looking limbs, and, what was rather more alluring, a goodly stack of the delicious white tubers. Joseph said morning prayers and washed in the stream and went about the task of building a fire. He was beginning to settle into the rhythm of this forest life, he saw.

"Are we very far from the Indigene village now?" he asked the noctambulo, when they had resumed their journey.

The noctambulo offered no response. Perhaps it had not understood. Joseph asked again, again to no avail. He realized that the noctambulo had never actually said it knew where the Indigene village was, or even that such a village existed anywhere in this region, but only that it would do what it could to help Joseph. How much faith, he wondered, should he place in Thustin's statement that an Indigene village lay just beyond the forest?

Thustin had also said that she herself had never gone beyond the boundaries of the domain of House Getfen. And in any case the village, if indeed there was one, might be off in some other direction entirely from the one Joseph and the noctambulo had taken.

But he had no choice, he knew, except to continue along this path and hope for the best. Three more days passed in this way. He felt himself growing tougher, harder, leaner all the time. The noctambulo provided food for them both, forest food, little gray scuttering animals that it caught with amazing agility, bright-plumaged birds that it snatched astonishingly out of mid-air as they fluttered by, odd gnarled roots and tubers, the occasional batch of mud-crawlers. Joseph began to grow inured to the strangeness and frequent unpleasantness of what was given him to eat. He accepted whatever came his way. So long as it did not actually make him ill, he thought, he would regard it as useful nutriment. He knew that he must replenish his vitality daily, using any means at hand, or he would never survive the rigors of this march.

He began to grow a beard. It was only about a year since Joseph had first begun shaving, and he had never liked doing it. It was no longer the custom for Masters to be bearded, not since his grandfather's time, but that hardly mattered to him under the present circumstances. The beard came in soft and furry and sparse at first, but soon it became bristly, like a man's beard. He did not think of himself as a man, not yet. But he suspected darkly that he might well become one before this journey had reached its end.

The nature of the forest was changing again. There was no longer any regularity to the forest floor: it was riven everywhere by ravines and gullies and upthrust hillocks of rock, so that Joseph and the noctambulo were forever climbing up one little slope and down another. Sometimes Joseph found himself panting from the effort. The trees were different, too, much larger than the ones in the woods behind them, and set much farther apart. From their multitude of branches sprouted a myriad of tiny gleaming needles of a metallic blue-green color, which they shed copiously with every good gust of wind. Thus a constant rainfall of needles came drifting through the air, tumbling down to form a thick layer of fine, treacherously slippery duff under foot.

Early one morning, just after the noctambulo had made the shift from the night-self to the day-self, Joseph stumbled over a concealed rock in a patch of that duff and began to topple. In an effort to regain his balance he took three wild lurching steps forward, but on the third of them he placed his left foot unknowingly on the smooth, flat upper surface of yet another hidden rock, slipped, felt the already weakened ankle giving way. He flung his arms out in a desperate attempt to stabilize himself, but it was no use: he skidded, pivoted, twisted in mid-air, landed heavily on his right elbow with his left leg bent sharply backward and crumpled up beneath his body.

The pain was incredible. He had never felt anything like it.

The first jolt came from his elbow, but that was obliterated an instant later by the uproar emanating from his leg. For the next few moments all he could do was lie there, half dazed, and let it go rippling up and down his entire left side. It felt as though streams of molten metal were running along his leg through tracks in his flesh. Then the effects went radiating out to all parts of his body. There was a stabbing sensation in his chest; his heart pounded terrifyingly; his vision grew blurred; he felt a strange tingling in his toes and fingers. Even his jaws began to ache. Simply drawing breath seemed to require conscious effort. The whole upper part of his body was trembling uncontrollably.

Gradually the initial shock abated. He caught his breath; he damped down the trembling. With great care Joseph levered himself upward, pushing against the ground with his hand, delicately raising his left hip so that he could unfold the twisted leg that now was trapped beneath his right thigh.

To his relief he was able to straighten it without enormous complications, though doing it was a slow and agonizing business. Gingerly he probed it with his fingertips. He had not broken any bones, so far as he was able to tell. But he knew that he had wrenched his knee very badly as he fell, and certainly there had been some sort of damage: torn ligaments, he supposed, or ruptured cartilages, or maybe the knee had been dislocated. Was that possible, he wondered—to dislocate your knee? It was hips or shoulders that you dislocated, not knees, right? He had watched his father once resetting the dislocated shoulder of a man of House Keilloran who had fallen from a hay-cart. Joseph thought that he understood the process; but if he had dislocated one of his own joints, how could he ever manage to reset it himself? Surely the noctambulo would be of no help.

In fact, he realized, the noctambulo was nowhere to be seen. He called out to it, but only the echo of his own voice returned to him. Of course: at the time of the accident it was the day-self, with whom Joseph had not established anything more than the most perfunctory relationship, that had been accompanying him. Uncaring or unaware, the big creature had simply gone shuffling onward through the woods when Joseph fell.

Joseph lay still for a long while, assessing the likelihood that he would be able to get to his feet unaided. He was growing used to the pain, the way he had grown used to the taste of mud-crawlers. The first horrendous anguish had faded now and there was only a steady hot throb. But when he tried to rise, even the smallest movement sent startling tremors through the injured leg.

Well, it was about time for sleep, anyway. Perhaps by the time he awoke the pain would have diminished, or the noctambulo would have returned, or both.

He closed his eyes and tried not to think about the fiery bulletins coming from his injured leg. Eventually he dropped into a fitful, uncertain sleep.

When he woke night had come and the noctambulo was back, having once again brought food. Joseph beckoned to him. "I have hurt myself," he said. "Hold out your hand to me." He had to say it two or three more times, but at length the noctambulo understood, and stooped down to extend one great dangling arm. Joseph clutched the noctambulo's wrist and pulled himself upward. He had just reached an upright position when the noctambulo, as though deciding its services were no longer needed, began to move away. Joseph swayed and tottered, but stayed on his feet, though he dared not put any but the lightest pressure on the left leg. His walking-stick lay nearby; he hobbled over to it and gathered it gratefully into his hand.

When they resumed their march after eating Joseph discovered that he was able to walk, after a fashion, although his knee was beginning to swell now and the pain, though it continued to lessen, was still considerable. He thought he might be becoming feverish, too. He limped along behind the noctambulo, wishing the gigantic thing would simply pick him up and carry him on its shoulder. But it did not occur to the noctambulo to do any such thing—it seemed entirely unaware that Joseph was operating under any handicap—and Joseph would not ask it. So he went limping on, sometimes falling far behind his huge companion and having to struggle in order to keep it in view. Several times he lost sight of it completely and managed to proceed only by following the noctambulo's trail through the duff. Then at last the duff gave out and Joseph, alone again, could not guess which way to go.

He halted and waited. He barely had the strength to go any farther just now, anyway. Either the noctambulo would come back or it would not, but either way Joseph needed to pause here until he felt ready to go on.

Then after a time he saw the noctambulo reappearing up ahead, haloed in the double shadow of the light from the two moons that were in the sky this night, great bright ruddy Sanivark high overhead with the littlest one, white-faced Mebriel, in its wake. There was a phosphorescent orange lichen here too, long flat sheets of it clinging to the limbs of the nearby trees like shrouds, casting a ghostly purple glow.

"Not stop here," the creature said, making a loose, swinging gesture with its arms. "Village over there."

Village? By this time Joseph had given up all hope of the village's existence.

The noctambulo turned again and went off in the direction from which it had just come. After a dozen steps or so it turned and plainly signaled to Joseph to follow along. Though he was at the edge of exhaustion, Joseph forced himself to go on. They descended a sloping plateau where the only vegetation was low sprawling shrubbery, as though they really had reached the far side of the forest at last, and then Joseph saw, clearly limned in the moonlight, row upon row of slender conical structures of familiar shape set close together in the field just before him, each one right up against the next, and he knew beyond doubt that he had finally come to the Indigene village that he had sought so long.

A wave of dizziness came over him in that same moment. Joseph could not tell whether it was born of relief or fatigue, or both. He knew that he had just about reached the end of his endurance. The pain in his leg was excruciating. He gripped his staff with both hands, leaned forward, fought to remain standing. After that everything took on a kind of red hallucinatory nimbus and he became uncertain of events for a while. Misty figures floated in the air before him, and at times he thought he heard his father's voice, or his sister's. When things were somewhat clear again he realized that he was lying atop a pile of furs within one of the Indigene houses, with a little ring of Indigenes sitting facing him in a circle, staring at him solemnly and with what appeared to be a show of deep interest.

"This will help your trouble," a voice said, and one of the Indigenes handed him a cluster of green, succulent stems. One of their healing herbs, Joseph assumed. According to his father, the Indigenes had an extensive pharmacopoeia of herbal remedies, and many of them were said to be of great merit. Joseph took the stems without hesitation. They were full of a juice that stung his lips and tongue, but not in any unpleasant way. Almost at once, so it seemed, he felt his fever lessening and the turmoil in his damaged leg beginning to abate a little.

He had been inside an Indigene house only once before. There was a settlement of Indigenes just at the border of the Keilloran lands, and his father had taken him to visit them when he was ten. The strange claustrophobic architecture, the thick, rough-surfaced mud-wattle walls tapering to a narrow point high overhead, the elaborate crosshatched planking of the floors, the slitlike windows that admitted only enough light to create a shadowy gloom, had made a deep impression on him. It was all much the same here, down to the odd sickroom sweetness, something like the odor of boiled milk, of the stagnant air.

Indigenes were found everywhere on Homeworld, though their aggregate population was not large, and apparently never had been, even in the years before the arrival of the first human settlers. They lived in small scattered villages in the forested regions that were not utilized by humans and also at the periphery of the settled regions, and no friction existed between them and the humans who had come to occupy their planet. There was scarcely any interaction between humans and Indigenes at all. They were gentle creatures who kept apart from humans as much as possible, coming and going as they pleased but generally staying on the lands that were universally considered to be theirs. Quietly they went about their Indigenous business, whatever that might be, without ever betraying the slightest sign of resentment or dismay that their world had been invaded not once but twice by strangers from the stars—first the easy-going villagers today known as the Folk and then, much later, the turbulent, more intense people whom the Folk had come to accept under the name and authority of Masters. Whether the Indigenes saw the Masters as masters too was something that Joseph did not know. Perhaps no one did. Balbus had hinted that they had a philosophy of deep indifference to all outside power. But he had never elaborated on that, and now Balbus was dead.

Joseph was aware that some Masters of scholarly leanings took a special interest in these people. His father was among that group. He collected their artifacts, their mysterious little sculptures and somber ceramic vessels, and supposedly, so said Balbus, he had made a study at one time of those profound philosophical beliefs of theirs. Joseph had no idea what those beliefs might be. His father had never discussed them with him in detail, any more than Balbus had. It was his impression that his father's interest in Indigenes was in no way reciprocated by the Indigenes themselves: on that one visit to the village near House Keilloran they had seemed as indifferent to his presence and Joseph's among them as the day-noctambulo had been when they were in the forest together. When Joseph's father made inquiries about certain Indigene artifacts that he had hoped to acquire they replied in subdued monotones, saying as little as necessary and never volunteering anything that was not a direct response to something Joseph's father had asked.

But perhaps they had felt intimidated by the presence among them of the powerful Martin Master Keilloran of House Keilloran, or else the Indigenes of the north were of another sort of temperament from those of Helikis. Joseph sensed no indifference here. These people had offered him a medicine for his leg, unasked. Their intent stares seemed to be the sign of real curiosity about him. Though he could not say why, Joseph did not feel in the slightest way like an intruder here. It was more like being a guest.

He returned their stares with curiosity of his own. They were strangely handsome people, though distinctly alien of form, with long, tubular heads that were flattened fore and aft, fleshy throats that pouted out in flamboyant extension in moments of excitement. Their eyes were little slits protected by bony arches that seemed almost like goggles, with peeps of scarlet showing through, the same vivid color as the eyes of noctambulos. Those red eyes were a clue: perhaps these races had been cousins somewhere far back on the evolutionary track, Joseph thought. And they walked upright, as noctambulos did. But the Indigenes were much smaller and slighter than noctambulos in build, closer to humans in general dimension. They had narrow ropy limbs that looked as though they had no muscular strength at all, though they could muster startling tensile force when needed: Joseph had seen Indigenes lift bundles of faggots that would break the back of a sturdy Folker. Their skins were a dull bronze, waxy-looking, with unsettling orange highlights glowing through. Their feet were splayed, long-toed. Their double-jointed seven-fingered hands were similarly rangy and pliant. Males and females looked identical to human eyes, although, Joseph supposed, not to other Indigenes.

The Indigenes sitting by his bedside, who were eight or nine in number, interrogated him, wanting to know who he was, where he was going. No one of them seemed to be in a position of leadership. Nor was there any special order in the way they questioned him. One would ask, and they would listen to his reply, and then another elsewhere in the group would ask something else.

The dialect they spoke was somewhat different from the version of Indigene that Joseph knew, but he had no particular difficulty understanding it or in shaping his own responses so that the pronunciation was closer to what seemed to be the norm here. He had studied the Indigene language since early childhood. It was something that all Masters were expected to learn, as a matter of courtesy toward the original inhabitants of the planet. You grew up speaking Folkish too—that was only common sense, in a world where nine humans out of ten were of the Folk—and of course the Masters had a language of their own, the language of the Great Houses. So every Master was trilingual. It had been Balbus's idea that Joseph study the language of Old Earth, also: an extra little scholarly fillip. It was ancestral to Master, and, so said Balbus, the more deeply versed you were in the ancient language, the better command you would have of the modern one. Joseph had not yet had time to discover whether that was so.

He thought it would be obvious to these Indigenes that he was a Master, but he made a point of telling them anyway. It produced no discernible reaction. He explained that he was the eldest son of Martin Master Keilloran of House Keilloran, who was one of the great men of the southern continent. That too seemed to leave them unmoved. "I was sent north to spend the summer with my kinsmen at House Getfen," he said. "It is our custom for the eldest son of every Great House to visit some distant House for a time just before he comes of age."

"There has been trouble at Getfen House," one of the Indigenes said gravely.

"Great trouble, yes. It was only by luck that I escaped." Joseph could not bring himself to ask for details of the events at Getfen House. "I need to return to my home now. I ask your assistance in conveying me to the nearest Great House. The people there will be able to help me get home." He was careful to use the supplicatory tense: he was not really asking, he was simply suggesting. Indigenes did not make direct requests of each other except under the most unusual of circumstances, let alone give each other orders: they merely indicated the existence of a need and awaited a confirmation that the need would be met. Whenever a human, even a Master, had reason to make a request of an Indigene, the same grammatical nicety was observed, not just because it was simple politeness to do so but because the Indigene ordinarily would not respond to, and perhaps would not even comprehend, anything that was couched in the mode reserved for a direct order. "Will you do that?" he asked. "I understand the closest Great House is House Ludbrek."

"That is correct, Master Joseph."

"Then that is where I must go."

"We will take you there," said another of the Indigenes. "But first you must rest and heal."

"Yes. Yes. I understand that."

They brought him food, a thick dark porridge and some stewed shredded meat that tasted like illimani and a cluster of small, juicy red berries: simple country stuff but a great improvement over raw mud-crawlers and half-cooked roots. Joseph's father had a serious interest in fine food and wine, but Joseph himself, who had been growing swiftly over the past year and a half, had up until now generally been more concerned with the quantity of the food he ate than with its quality.

So he fell with great avidity upon the tray of Indigene food, but was surprised to find he could not eat very much of it despite the intensity of his appetite. The fever was returning, he realized. His head had begun to ache, his skin felt hot and dry to his own touch, his throat was constricted. He asked for and received a few more of the green succulent stems, which provided the same short-term relief as before, and then the Indigenes left him and he settled back on his bed of furs to get some sleep. The furs had a sour, tangy, insistent odor that he did not like, nor did he care for the unpleasant milky sweetness of the air itself in here, but despite those distractions he fell quickly into a deep, welcome sleep.

When he opened his eyes again daylight was coming through the slits in the walls. It had been late at night when he arrived here, practically morning; he wondered whether he had slept through an entire day and a night, and this was the second morning. Probably so. And just as well, he thought, considering the fragmentary nature of the sleep he had had in the forest.

For the first time since his arrival he thought of the noctambulo who had been his guide in the wilderness. He asked the Indigenes about it, but the only answer he got was a gesture of crossed arms, the Indigene equivalent of a shrug. The Indigenes knew nothing of the noctambulo. Perhaps they had not even noticed its presence, and it had simply wandered off after delivering him. Joseph realized that from first to last he had understood nothing of the noctambulo's purposes and motives, if it had any. It had tracked him, it had fed him, it had brought him here, and now it was gone, and he never would know anything more.

The fever did not seem to be much of a problem this morning. It was easier for him to eat than before. Afterward he asked one of the Indigenes to help him rise. The Indigene extended one loose-jointed ropy arm and drew him to his feet, raising him in one smooth motion as though Joseph had no weight at all.

He leaned on his walking-stick and inspected himself. His left leg was purple and black with bruises and terribly swollen from mid-thigh to ankle. Even his toes seemed puffy. The leg looked grotesque, ghastly, a limb that belonged to a creature of another species entirely. Little arrows of pain traversed its length. Simply *looking* at the leg made it hurt.

Cautiously Joseph tried putting some weight on his foot, the merest bit of experimental pressure. That was a mistake. He touched just the tips of his toes to the floor and winced as an immediate stern warning came rocketing up toward his brain: Stop! Don't! All right, he told himself. A bad idea. He would have to wait a little longer. How long would healing take, though? Three days? A week? A month? He had to get on his way. They would be worried sick about him at home. Surely word had reached Helikis by now of the uprising in the north. The interruption in combinant communication alone would be indication enough that something was wrong.

He was confident that once he reached Ludbrek House he would be able to send some sort of message to his family, even if the Ludbreks could not arrange transportation to Helikis for him right away, because of the present troubles. But first he had to get to Ludbrek House. Joseph could not guess how far from here that might be. The Great Houses of Helikis were set at considerable distances from one another, and probably that was true up here, too. Still, it should be no more than three days' journey, or four by wagon. Unless these Indigenes had more interest in the machines of the Masters than those of the Southland did, they would not have cars or trucks of any sort, but they should, at least, have wagons, drawn by teams of bandars or more likely, he supposed, yaramirs, that could get them there. He would inquire about that later in the day. But also he had to recover to a point where he would be able to withstand the rigors of the journey.

Joseph hunted through the utility case to see if it contained medicines of any sort, something to control fever, or to reduce inflammation. There did not seem to be. An odd omission, he thought. He did find a couple of small devices that perhaps were medical instruments: one that looked as if it could be used for stitching up minor wounds, and another that apparently provided a way of testing water for bacterial contamination. Neither of those, though, would do him any good at present.

He asked for and got more of the succulent herb. That eased things a little. Then, when it occurred to him that bandaging his leg might speed the process of healing, he suggested to one of the Indigenes who seemed to be in virtually constant attendance on him that it would be helpful if the Indigene were to bring him a bolt or two of the light cottony fabric out of which they fashioned their own clothing.

"I will do that," the Indigene replied.

But there was a problem. The leg was so stiff and swollen that he could not flex it. There was no way Joseph could reach down as far as his ankle to do the wrapping himself.

"What is your name?" he said to the Indigene who had brought the cloth. It was time to start making an attempt to look upon these people as individuals.

"I am Ulvas."

"Ulvas, I need your help in this," Joseph said. As always, he employed the supplicatory tense. It was becoming quite natural for him to frame his sentences that way, which Joseph took as a sign that he was not just translating his thoughts from the Master tongue to Indigene, but actually thinking in the language of the Indigenes.

"I will help you," Ulvas replied, the customary response to almost any supplication. But the Indigene gave Joseph a look of unmistakable perplexity. "Is it that you wish to do something with the cloth? Then it is needful that you tell me what is it is that you wish me to do."

"To bind my leg," Joseph said, gesturing. "From here to here."

The Indigene did not seem to have any very clear concept of what binding Joseph's leg would involve. On its first attempt it merely draped a useless loose shroud of cloth around his ankle. Carefully, using the most courteous mode of instruction he could find, Joseph explained that that was not what he had in mind. Other Indigenes gathered in the room. They murmured to one another. Ulvas turned away from Joseph and consulted them. A lengthy discussion ensued, all of it too softly and swiftly spoken for Joseph to be able to follow. Then the Indigene began again, turning to Joseph for approval at every step of the way. This time it wound the cloth more tightly, beginning with the arch of Joseph's foot, going around the ankle, up along his calf. Whenever Ulvas allowed the binding to slacken, Joseph offered mild correction.

The whole group of Indigenes crowded around, staring with unusual wide-eyed intensity. Joseph had had little experience in deciphering the facial expressions of Indigenes, but it seemed quite apparent that they were watching as though something extraordinary were under way.

From time to time during the process Joseph gasped as the tightening bandage, in the course of bringing things back into alignment, struck a lode of pain in the battered limb. But he knew that he was doing the right thing in having his leg bandaged like this. Immobilize the damned leg: that way, at least, he would not constantly be putting stress on the torn or twisted parts whenever he made the slightest movement, and it would begin to heal. Already he could feel the bandage's beneficial effects. The thick binding gripped and held his leg firmly, though not so firmly, he hoped, as to cut off circulation, just tightly enough to constrain it into the proper position.

When the wrapping had reached as far as his knee, Joseph released the Indigene from its task and finished the job himself, winding the bandage upward and upward until it terminated at the fleshiest part of his thigh. He fastened it there to keep it from unraveling and looked up in satisfaction. "That should do it, I think," he said.

The entire group of Indigenes was still staring at him in the same wonderstruck way.

He wondered what could arouse such curiosity in them. Was it the fact that his body was bare from the waist down? Very likely that was it. Joseph smiled. These people would never have had reason to see a naked human before. This was something quite new to them. Having no external genitalia of their own, they must be fascinated by those strange organs dangling between his legs. That had to be the explanation, he thought. It was hard to imagine that they would get so worked up over a simple thing like the bandaging of a leg.

But he was wrong. It *was* the bandage, not the unfamiliarities of his anatomy, that was the focus of their attention.

He found that out a few hours later, after he had spent some time hobbling about his room with the aid of his stick, and had had a midday meal of stewed vegetables and braised illimani meat brought to him. He was experimenting with the still useless combinant once again, his first attempt with it in days, when there came a sound of reed-flute music from the corridor, the breathy, toneless music that had some special significance for the Indigenes, and then an Indigene of obvious grandeur and rank entered the room, a personage who very likely was the chieftain of the village, or perhaps the high priest, if they had such things as high priests. It was clad not in simple cotton robes but in a brightly painted leather cape and a knee-length leather skirt much bedecked with strings of seashells, and it carried itself with unusual dignity and majesty. Signaling to the musicians to be still, it looked toward Joseph and said, "I am the Ardardin. I give the visiting Master good greeting and grant him the favor of our village."

Ardardin was not a word in Joseph's vocabulary, but he took it to be a title among these people. The Ardardin asked Joseph briefly about the uprising at Getfen House and his own flight through the forest. Then, indicating Joseph's bandaged leg, it said, "Will that wrapping cause your injuries to heal more quickly?"

"So I expect, yes."

"The matagava of the Masters is a powerful thing."

Matagava, Joseph knew, was a word that meant something like "magic," "supernatural power," "spiritual force." But he suspected that in this context it had other meanings, too: scientific skill, technical prowess. The Indigenes were known to have great respect for such abilities in that area as the humans who lived on their world manifested—their technology, their engineering achievements, their capacity to fly through the air from continent to continent and through space from world to world. They did not seem to covet such powers themselves, not in the slightest, but they clearly admired them. And now he was being hailed as a person of great matagava himself. Why, though, should a simple thing like bandaging an injured leg qualify as a display of matagava? Joseph wanted to protest that the Ardardin did him too much honor. But he was fearful of giving offense, and said nothing.

"Can you walk a short distance?" the Ardardin asked. "There is something I would like to show you nearby, if you will come."

Since he had already discovered that a certain amount of walking was, though difficult, not impossible for him, Joseph said that he would. He used his stick as a crutch, so that he would not have to touch his sore foot to the ground. Two Indigenes, the one named Ulvas and another one, walked close beside him so that they could steady him if he began to fall.

The Ardardin led Joseph along a spiral corridor that opened unexpectedly into fresh air, and thence to a second building behind the one where he had been staying. Within its gloomy central hall were three Indigenes lying on fur mats. Joseph could see at first glance that all three were sick, that this must be an infirmary of some sort.

"Will you examine them?" the Ardardin asked.

The request took Joseph by surprise. *Examine* them? Had they somehow decided that he must be a skilled physician, simply because he had been able to manage something as elementary as bandaging a sprained knee?

But he could hardly refuse the request. He looked down at the trio of Indigenes. One, he saw, had a nasty ulcerated wound in its thigh, seemingly not deep but badly infected. Its forehead was bright with the glow of a high fever. Another had apparently broken its arm: no bone was showing, but the way the arm was bent argued for a fracture. There was nothing outwardly wrong with the third Indigene, but it held both its hands pressed tight against its abdomen, making what had to be an indication of severe pain.

The Ardardin stared at Joseph in an unambiguously expectant way. Its fleshy throat-pouch was pouting in and out at great speed. Joseph felt mounting uneasiness.

It began to occur to him that the medical techniques of the Indigenes might go no farther than the use of simple herbal remedies. Anything more complicated than the brewing of potions might be beyond them. Closing a wound, say, or setting a broken bone. Getting a pregnant woman through a difficult childbirth. And any kind of surgery, certainly. You needed very great matagava to perform such feats, greater matagava than had been granted to these people.

And the human Masters had that kind of matagava, yes. With the greatest of ease they could perform feats that to the Indigenes must seem like miracles.

Joseph knew that if his father were here right now, he would deal swiftly enough with the problems of these three—do something about the infected thigh, set the broken arm, arrive at an explanation of the third one's pain and cope with its cause. At home he had many times seen Martin, in the course of his circuits around the estate, handle cases far more challenging than these seemed to be. His father's matagava was a powerful thing, yes:

or, to put it another way, it was his father's responsibility to look after the lives and welfare of all those who lived on the lands of House Keilloran and he accepted that responsibility fully, and so he had taken the trouble to learn at least certain basic techniques of medicine in order that he could meet an emergency in the fields.

But Joseph was not the lord of House Keilloran, and he had had no formal medical training. He was only a boy of fifteen, who might one day inherit his father's title and his father's responsibilities, and he was a long way just now from being prepared to undertake any sort of adult tasks. Did the Ardardin not realize how young he was? Probably not. Indigenes might be no better able to distinguish an adolescent human from an adult one than humans were when it came to distinguishing a male Indigene from a female one. The Ardardin perceived him as a human, that was all, and very likely as a full-grown one. His height and the new beard he had grown would help in fostering that belief. And humans had great matagava; this Joseph Master Keilloran who had come among them was a human; therefore—

"Will you do it?" the Ardardin said, using not just the supplicatory tense but a form that Joseph thought might be known to grammarians as the intensive supplicatory. The Indigene—the chieftain, the high priest—was *begging* him.

He could not bear to disappoint them. He hated doing anything under false pretenses, and he did not want to arouse any false hopes, either. But he could not resist an abject plea, either. These people had willingly taken him in, and they had cared for him these two days past, and they had promised to transport him to Ludbrek House when he was strong enough to leave their village. Now they wanted something from him in return. And he did have at least some common-sense notions of first aid. There was no way he could refuse this request.

"Can you raise them up a little higher?" he asked. "I'm not able to bend, because of my leg."

The Ardardin gestured, and several Indigenes piled up a tall stack of furs and placed the one with the wound in its thigh on top. Bending forward a little, Joseph inspected the cut. It was three or four inches long, perhaps half an inch wide, fairly shallow. There was swelling all around, and reddening of the bronze-colored skin. Hesitantly Joseph placed his fingertips against the ragged edges of the opening. The texture of the alien skin was smooth, unyielding, almost slippery, oddly unreal. A small sighing sound came from the Indigene at Joseph's touch, but nothing more. That did not sound like an indicator of severe pain. Gently Joseph drew the sides of the wound apart and peered in.

He saw pus, plenty of it. But the wound was filthy, besides, covered with a myriad of black spots, the dirt of whatever object had caused it. Joseph doubted that it had ever been cleaned. Did these people not even have enough sense to wash a gash like this out?

"I need a bowl of hot water," Joseph said. "And clean cloth of the kind I used for bandaging my leg."

This was like being an actor in a play, he thought. He was playing the role of The Doctor.

But that was no actor lying on the pile of furs before him, and that wound was no artifact of stage makeup. He felt a little queasy as he swabbed it clean. The Indigene stirred, moaned a little, made a small shuddering movement.

"The juice that you gave me, to make my fever go down: give some of that to him, too."

"To her," someone behind him corrected.

"To her," said Joseph, searching for and not finding any indication that his patient was female. Doubtless the Indigenes did have two sexes, because there were both male and female pronouns in their language, but all of them, male and female both, had the same kind of narrow transverse slit at the base of the abdomen, and whatever sort of transformation came over that slit during the sexual process, what organs of intromission or reception might emerge at that time, was not anything that the Indigenes had ever thought necessary to explain to any human.

He cleaned the wound of as much superficial dirt as he could, and expressed a good deal of pus, and laved the opening several times with warm water. The queasiness he had felt at first while handling the wound quickly vanished. He grew very calm, almost detached: after a while all that mattered to him was the task itself, the process of undoing the damage that neglect and infection had caused. Not only was he able to steel himself against whatever incidental pain he might be causing the patient in the course of the work, but he realized a little while further on that he was concentrating so profoundly on the enterprise that he had begun to forget to notice the pain of his own injury.

He wished he had some kind of antiseptic ointment to apply, but his command of the Indigene language did not extend as far as any word for antisepsis, and when he asked if their herbal remedies included anything for reducing the inflammation of an open wound, they did not seem to understand what he was saying. No antisepsis, then. He hoped that the Indigene's natural healing processes were up to the task of fighting off such infection as had already taken hold.

When he had done all that he could to clean the wound Joseph instructed Ulvas in the art of bandaging it to hold it closed. He did not want to experiment with using the device from his utility case that seemed to be designed for stitching wounds, partly because he was not certain that that was what it was for, and partly because he doubted that he had cleaned the wound sufficiently to make stitching it up at this point a wise thing to do. Later, he thought, he would ask Ulvas to bring him a chunk of raw meat and he would practice using the device to close an incision, and then, perhaps, he could wash the wound out a second time and close it. But he dared not attempt to use the instrument now, not with everyone watching.

Dealing with the broken arm was a more straightforward business. The field hands of House Keilloran broke limbs all the time, and it was a routine thing for them to be brought to his father for repairs. Joseph had watched the process often enough. A compound fracture would have been beyond him, but this looked like nothing more than a simple break. What you did, he knew, was manipulate the limb to make the fractured bone drop back into its proper alignment, and bind it up to keep the broken ends from moving around, and do what was necessary to reduce inflammation. Time would take care of the rest. At least, that was how it worked with Folkish fractures. But there was no reason to think that Indigene bones were very different in basic physiology.

Joseph wanted to be gentle as he went about the work. But what he discovered very quickly was that in working on an unanaesthetized patient the key lay in getting the job over with as fast as possible, rather than moving with tiny circumspect steps in an attempt to avoid inflicting pain. That would only draw things out and make it worse. You had to take hold, pull, push, hope for the best. The patient—this one was male, they told him—made one sharp grunting sound as Joseph, acting out an imitation of the things he had seen his father do, grasped his limply dangling forearm with one hand and the upper part of his arm with the other and exerted sudden swift inward pressure. After the grunt came a gasp, and then a sigh, and then a kind of exhalation that seemed to be entirely one of relief.

There, Joseph thought, with a hot burst of satisfaction. He had done it. Matagava, indeed! "Bind the arm the way you bound my leg," he told Ulvas, no supplication this time, simple instruction, and moved to the next patient.

But the third case was a baffling one. What was he supposed to do about a swollen abdomen? He had no way of making a rational diagnosis. Perhaps there was a tumor in there, perhaps it was an intestinal blockage, or perhaps—this patient was another female—the problem was a complication of pregnancy. But, though he had blithely enough talked himself into going through with this medical masquerade, Joseph's audacity did not begin to extend to a willingness to perform a surgical exploration of the patient's interior. He had no notion of how to go about such a thing, for one—the thought of trying to make an incision in living flesh brought terrifying images to his mind—nor would there be any purpose in it, anyway, for he had no inkling of internal Indigene anatomy, would not be able to tell one organ from another, let alone detect any abnormality. So he did nothing more than solemnly pass his hands up and down over the patient's taut skin with a kind of stagy solemnity, feeling the strangeness again, that cool dry inorganic unreality, lightly pressing here and there, as though seeking by touch alone some understanding of the malady within. He thought he should at least seem to be making an attempt of some kind at performing an examination, however empty and foolish he knew it to be, and since he did not dare do anything real this would have to suffice. He was, at any rate, unable to feel anything unusual within the abdominal cavity by these palpations, no convulsive heavings of troubled organs, no sign of some massive cancerous growth. But then, thinking he should do something more and obeying a sudden stab of inspiration, Joseph found himself making broad sweeping gestures in the air above the Indigene and intoning a nonsensical little rhythmic chant, as primitive witch-doctors were known to do in old adventure stories that he had read. It was sheer play-acting, and a surge of contempt for his own childishness went sweeping through him even as he did it, but for the moment he was unable to resist his own silly impulse.

Only for a moment. Then he could no longer go on with the game.

Joseph looked away, embarrassed. "For this one I am unable to do anything further," he told the Ardardin. "And you must allow me to lie down now. I am not well myself, and very tired."

"Yes. Of course. But we thank you deeply, Master Joseph."

He felt bitter shame for the fraud he had just perpetrated. Not just the preposterous business at the end, but the entire cruel charade. What would his father say, he wondered? A boy of fifteen, posing as a doctor? Piously laying claim to skills he did not in any way possess? The proper thing to do, he knew, would have been to say, "I'm sorry, I'm just a boy, the truth is that I have no right to be doing this." But they had wanted so badly for him to heal these three people with the shining omnipotent human matagava that they knew he must have within him. The very grammar of the Ardardin's request had revealed the intensity of their desire. And he had done no real harm, had he? Surely it was better to wash and bind a gash like that than to leave it open to fester. He felt confident that he had actually set that broken arm properly, too. He could not forgive himself, though, for that last bit of disgraceful chicanery.

His leg was hurting again, too. They had left a beaker of the succulent-juice by his bedside. He took enough of it to ease the pain and slipped off into a fitful sleep.

When he awoke the next day he found that they had set out inviting-looking bowls of fruit at his side and had put festive bundles of flowers all around his chamber, long-tubed reddish blossoms that had a peppery aroma. It all looked celebratory. They had not brought him flowers before. Several Indigenes were kneeling beside him, waiting for him to open his eyes. Joseph was beginning to recognize the distinct features of different individuals now. He saw Ulvas nearby, and another who had told him yesterday that its name was Cuithal, and a third whom he did not know. Then the Ardardin entered, bearing an additional armload of flowers: plainly an offering. It laid them at Joseph's feet and made an intricate gesture that seemed certainly, alien though it was, to be one of honor and respect.

The Ardardin earnestly inquired after the state of Joseph's health. It seemed to Joseph that his leg was giving him less discomfort this morning, and he said so. To this the Ardardin replied that his three patients were greatly improved also, and were waiting just outside in the hallway to express their thanks.

So this will go on and on, Joseph thought, abashed. But he could hardly refuse to see them. They came in one by one, each bearing little gifts to add to those already filling Joseph's room: more flowers, more fruit, smooth-sided ceramic vessels that his father would gladly have owned, brightly colored weavings. Their eyes were gleaming with gratitude, awe, perhaps even love. The one who had had the infected wound in her thigh looked plainly less feverish. The one with the broken arm—it had been very nicely bound by Ulvas, Joseph saw—seemed absolutely cheerful. Joseph was relieved and considerably gratified to see that his amateur ministrations had not only done no harm but seemed actually to have been beneficial.

But the great surprise was the third patient, the one with the swollen abdomen, over whom Joseph had made those shameful witch-doctor conjurations. She appeared to be in a state of transcendental well-being, wholly aglow with radiant emanations of health. Throwing herself at Joseph's feet, she burst forth with a gushing, barely coherent expression of thankfulness that was almost impossible for him to follow in any detailed way, but was clear enough in general meaning.

Joseph hardly knew how to react. The code of honor by which he had been raised left no room for taking credit for something you had not done. Certainly it would be even worse to accept credit for something achieved accidentally, something you had brought about in the most cynical and flippant manner.

Yet he could not deny that this woman had risen from her bed of pain just hours after he had made those foolish conjurations above her body. A purely coincidental recovery, he thought. Or else his idiotic mumblings had engendered in her such a powerful wave of faith in his great matagava that she had expelled the demon of torment from her body on her own. What could he say? "No, you are mistaken to thank me, I did nothing of any value for you, this is all an illusion"? He did not have the heart to say any such things. There was the risk of shattering her fragile recovery by doing so, if indeed faith alone had healed her. Nor did he want to reject ungraciously the gratitude of these people for what they thought he had done for them. He remained aware that he was still dependent on them himself. If a little inward embarrassment was the price of getting himself from here to Ludbrek House, so be it. Let them think he had worked miracles, then. Perhaps he had. In any event let them feel obligated to him, because he needed help from them. Even the honor of a Master must sometimes be subordinated to the needs of sheer survival, eh, Balbus? Eh?

Besides—no question about this part of it—there was real satisfaction in doing something useful for others, no matter how muddledly he had accomplished it. The one thing that had been dinned into him from childhood, as the heir to House Keilloran, is that Masters did not simply rule, they also served. The two concepts were inextricably intertwined. You had the good luck to be born a Master instead of one of the Folk, yes, and that meant you lived a privileged life of comfort and power. But it was not merely a life of casual taking, of living cheerfully at one's ease at the expense of hardworking humbler people. Only a fool would think that that was what a Master's life was like. A Master lived daily in a sense of duty and obligation to all those around him.

Thus far Joseph had not had much opportunity to discharge those duties and obligations. At this stage of his life he was expected mainly to observe and learn. He would not be given any actual administrative tasks at the House until his sixteenth birthday. For now his job was only to prepare himself for his ultimate responsibilities. And there always were servants on all sides of him to take care of the things that ordinary people had to do for themselves, making things easy for him while he was doing his observing and learning.

He felt a little guilty about that. He was quite aware that up till now, up till the moment of his flight into the woods with Getfen House ablaze behind him, his life had been one of much privilege and little responsibility. He was not a doer yet, only someone for whom things were done. There had been no real tests for him, neither of his abilities nor of his innate character.

Was he, then, truly a good person? That remained open to question. Since he had never been tested, he had no way of knowing. He had done things he should not have done. He had rebelled sometimes, at least inwardly, against his father's absolute authority. He had been guilty of little blasphemies and minor acts of wickedness. He had been needlessly harsh with his younger brothers, enjoying the power that his age and strength gave him over them, and he knew that that was wrong. He had gone through a phase of wanting to torment his sometimes irritating sister Cailin, mocking her little frailties of logic and hiding or even destroying her cherished things, and had felt real pleasure mingled with the guilt of that. All these things, he knew, were things that most boys did and would outgrow, and he could not really condemn himself for doing them, but even so they left him with some uncertainty about whether he had been living on the path of virtue, as by definition a good person must do. He understood how to *imitate* being a good person, yes, how to do the kind of things that good persons did, but how sincere was it, really, to do that? Was it not the case that good people did good things through natural innate virtue, rather than consciously working up some flurry of good-deed-doing on special demand?

Well, there had been special demand just now, and, responding to it, he had wantonly allowed himself to pose as a doctor, which, considering that he had no real medical knowledge, could only be considered a bad thing, or at least morally questionable. But he had managed, all the same, to heal or at least improve the condition of three suffering people, and that was beyond doubt a good thing. What did that say about his own goodness, that he had achieved something virtuous by morally questionable means? He still did not know. But at least, for this murky reason or that one, this shabby motive or that, he had accomplished something that was undeniably good. He tried to cling to that awareness. Perhaps there were no innately good people, only people who made it their conscious task, for whatever reason, to do things that would be deemed good. Time alone would give him the answer to that. But still Joseph found himself hoping that he would discover, as he entered adulthood, that in fact he was fundamentally good, not simply pretending to goodness, and that everything he did would be for the best, not just for himself but for others.

Having done indisputably good deeds here in this village, the one thing Joseph now feared more than anything else was that they would not want to let such a powerful healer out of their grasp. But that was not how the minds of these people worked, evidently. In another few days his own healing had progressed to the point where he was able to walk with only a slight limp. Removing the bandage, he saw that the swelling was greatly reduced and the discoloration of his flesh was beginning to fade. Shortly Ulvas came to him and said they had a wagon ready to take him, now, to Ludbrek House.

It was a simple vehicle of the kind they used for hauling farm produce from place to place: big wooden wheels set on a wooden axle, an open cabin in back, a seat up front for the driver, a team of squat broad-shouldered yaramirs tethered to the shafts. The planked floor of the cabin in which Joseph rode had borne a cargo of vegetables not long before, and the scent of dark moist soil was still on the wood, and subtle smells of rotting leaves and stems. Two Indigenes whose names Joseph did not know sat up front to guide the team; another two, Ulvas and Cuithal, who seemed to have been appointed his special attendants, sat with him in back. They had given him a pile of furs to sit on, but the cart was not built for pleasure-riding and he felt every movement of the creaking irregular wheels against the ancient uneven road below.

This was no longer forest country, here, the ruggedly beautiful north country that was, or had been, the domain of House Getfen. This was farmland. Perhaps it was shared by Indigenes of several villages who came out from their settlements to work it. Most of it was perfectly flat, though it was broken in places by rolling meadows and fields, and Joseph could see low hills in the distance that were covered with stiff, close-set ranks of slender trees with purplish leaves.

His geography textbook might tell him something about the part of the country that he was entering. But since leaving Getfen House he had not so much as glanced at the little hand-held reader on which all his textbooks were stored, and he could not bring himself to take it out now. He was supposed to study every day, of course, even while he was up there in High Manza on holiday among his Getfen cousins: his science, his mathematics, his philosophy, his studies in languages and literature, and most particularly his history and geography lessons, designed to prepare him for his eventual role as a Master among Masters. The geography book described Homeworld from pole to pole, including things that he had never expected to experience at the close range he was seeing them now. The history of Homeworld was mainly the history of its great families and the regime that they had imposed on the Folk who had come here before them, although his lessons told him also of the first Homeworld, the ancient one called Earth, from which all humans had come once upon a time, and whose own history must never be forgotten, shadowy and remote though it was to its descendants here, because there were sorry aspects of that history that those descendants must take care never to recapitulate. And then there were all the other subjects that he knew he should be reading, even without Balbus here to direct him. *Especially* without Balbus here to direct him.

His energies had been focused on sheer survival during the days that had just gone by, though, and while he was wandering in the forest it seemed almost comically incongruous to sit huddled under some shelter of boughs reading about the distant past or the niceties of philosophy when at any moment some band of rebellious Folk might come upon him and put an end to his life. And then, later, when he was safe at the Indigene village, any thought of resuming his studies immediately brought to Joseph's mind the image of his tutor Balbus lying sprawled on his back in the courtyard of Getfen House with his throat cut, and it became too painful for him to proceed. Now, jolting and bumping along through this Manza farm country, reading seemed impossible for other reasons. Joseph simply wanted to reach Ludbrek House as quickly as possible and return at long last to the company of his own people.

But Ludbrek House, when they came to it after a three-day journey, stood devastated atop its hilltop ridge. What was left of it was no more than a desolate scar across the green land. The burned roofless walls of the estate house stood out above cold dark heaps of rubble. Its mighty structural members were laid bare, charred and blackened timbers, spars, joists, beams, like the great skeleton of some giant prehistoric beast rising in a haunting fragmentary way from the matrix that enclosed it. There was the bitter ugly smell of smoke everywhere, old smoke, dead smoke, the smoke of fierce fires that had cooled many days ago.

The rest of the huge estate, so far as Joseph was able to see from where he stood, was in equally sorry condition. House Ludbrek, like House Getfen and House Keilloran, like any of the Great Houses of Homeworld, was the center of an immense sphere of productive activity. Radiating outward from the manor-house and its fields and gardens and parks were zone after zone of agricultural and industrial compounds, the farms and the homes of the farmers over here, the factories over there, the mills and millponds, the barns, the stables, the workers' quarters and the commercial sectors that served them, and everything else that went to make up the virtually self-sufficient economic unit that was a Great House. It seemed to Joseph from where he stood looking out over the Ludbrek lands from his vantage point atop this hill that all of that had been given over to ruination. It was a sickening sight. The landscape was a nightmarish scene of wholesale destruction, long stretches of burned buildings, trucks and carts overturned, machinery smashed, farm animals slain, roads cut, dams broken, fields flooded. An oppressive stillness prevailed. Nothing moved; no sound could be heard.

Through him as he scanned the devastation from east to west and then from west to east again, gradually coming to terms with the reality of it, ran a storm of emotion: shock, horror, fear, sadness, and then, moments later, disgust and anger, a burst of fury at the stupidity of it all. There was no way at that moment for Joseph to step away from his own identity as a Master: and, as a Master, he raged at the idiotic wastefulness of the thing that had been done here.

What had these people believed they were accomplishing when they put not only Ludbrek House but House Ludbrek itself to the torch? Did they imagine they were striking a blow for freedom? Liberating themselves finally, after thousands of years of slavery, from the cruel grasp of the tyrannical overlords who had dropped down out of the stars to thrust their rule on them?

Well, yes, Joseph thought, that was surely what they believed they were doing. But what the Folk here had actually achieved was to destroy their own livelihoods: to wipe out in one brief orgy of blood and flame the fruits of centuries of careful planning and building. How would they support themselves now that the factories and mills were gone? Would they go back to tilling the soil as their ancestors had done before the first Masters arrived? If that was too much for them, they could simply scrabble in the woods for mud-crawlers and roots, as he himself had done not long before. Or would they just wander from province to province, begging their food from those who had not been so foolish as to torch their estates, or possibly just taking it from them? They had not given any thought to any of that. They had wanted only to overthrow their Masters, no doubt, but then when that was done they had been unable to halt their own juggernaut of destructiveness, and they had allowed it to go mindlessly on and on and on beyond that until they had completely broken, surely beyond any hope of repair, the very system that sustained their lives.

His four Indigenes stood to one side, silently watching him. Their slitted eyes and thin expressionless lips gave Joseph no clue to what they might be thinking. Perhaps they were thinking nothing at all: he had asked them to take him to this place, and they had done so, and here they were, and what one group of humans seemed to have done to the property of the other group of humans was no affair of theirs. They were waiting now, he assumed, to find out what he wished them to do for him now, since it was plain that he would find nothing of any use to him here.

What *did* he want them to do for him now? What *could* they do for him now?

He moistened his lips and said, "What is the name of the next Great House to the south? How far is it from here?"

They made no reply. None of them reacted to Joseph's question in any way. It was almost as though they had not understood his words.

"Ulvas? Cuithal?" He shot a direct glance at them this time, a Master's glance, and put a slight sharpness in his tone this time. For whatever that might be worth—a Master speaking to Indigenes, for whom his status as a Master very likely had no very important significance. Especially now, here, amid these ruins. But probably not under any other circumstances, either. Whatever respect for him they might have was founded on his deeds as a healer, not on the rank he might hold among humans.

This time, though, he got an answer, though not a satisfying one. It was Ulvas who spoke. "Master Joseph, we are not able to say."

"And why is that?"

"Because we do not know." This time the response came from Cuithal. "We know House Getfen to the north of us, beyond the forest. We know House Ludbrek to the south of us. Other than those two, we know nothing about the Great Houses. There has never been need for us to know."

That seemed plausible enough. Joseph could not claim any real skill in interpreting the shades of meaning in an Indigene's tone of voice, but there was no reason to think they would lie to him about a matter of mere fact, or, indeed, about anything whatever. And it might well be that if he got back into the wagon and asked them to take him on toward the south until they came to the domain of another Great House, they would do so.

The next House, though, might be hundreds of miles away. And might well turn out to be in the same sorry shape as this one. Joseph could not ask these Indigenes, however devoted to him they might be, to travel on and on and on with him indefinitely, taking him some unstipulated distance beyond their own village in the pursuit of so dubious a quest. But the only other alternative, short of his continuing on alone through this wrecked and probably dangerous province, was to return to the village of the Indigenes, and what use was there in that? He had to keep on moving southward. He did not want to end his days serving as tribal witch-doctor to a village of Indigenes somewhere in High Manza.

They stood perfectly still, waiting for him to speak. But he did not know what to tell them. Suddenly he could not bear their silent stares. Perhaps he would do better going a short distance off to collect his thoughts. Their proximity was distracting. "Stay here," Joseph said, after a long uncomfortable moment. "I want to look around a bit."

"You do not want us to accompany you, Master Joseph?"

"No. Not now. Just stay here until I come back."

He turned away from them. The burned-out manor-house lay about a hundred yards in front of him. He walked slowly toward it. It was a frightful thing to see. Was this what Getfen House looked like this morning? Keilloran House, even? It was painful just to draw a breath here. That bleak, stale, sour stink of extinct combustion, of ashes turned cold but still imbued with the sharp chemical odor of fast oxidation, jabbed at his nostrils with palpable force. Joseph imagined it coating his lungs with dark specks. He went past the gaping façade and found himself in the ash-choked ruins of a grand vestibule, with a series of even grander rooms opening before him, though they were only the jagged crusts of rooms now. He stood at the lip of a vast crater that might once have been a ballroom or a festival-hall. There was no way to proceed here, for the floor was mostly gone, and where it still remained the fallen timbers of the roof jutted upward before him, blocking the way. He had to move carefully, on account of his injured leg. Going around to the left, Joseph entered what might have been a servants' station, leading to a low-roofed room that from the looks of it had probably been a way-kitchen for the reheating of dishes brought up from the main kitchens below. A hallway behind that took him to rooms of a grander nature, where blackened stone sculptures stood in alcoves and tattered tapestries dangled from the walls.

The splendor and richness of Ludbrek House was evident in every inch of the place, even now. This chamber might have been a music room; this, a library; this long hall, a gallery of paintings. The destruction had been so monstrously thorough that very little was left of any of that. But also the very monstrosity of it numbed Joseph's mind to what he was seeing. One could not continue endlessly to react in shock to this. The capacity to react soon was exhausted. One could only, after a while, absorb it in a state of calm acceptance and even with a certain cool fascination, the sort of reaction one might have while visiting the excavated ruins of some city that had been buried by a flood of volcanic lava five thousand years before.

By one route and another, bypassing places where there had been serious structural collapses, Joseph came out at last on a broad flagstone terrace that looked down into the main garden of the estate. The garden had been laid out in a broad bowl-shaped depression that sloped gradually away toward a wooded zone beyond, and, to Joseph's surprise, it bore scarcely any trace of damage. The velvety lawns were green and unmarked. The avenues of shrubbery were intact. The marble fountains that flanked the long string of reflecting pools still were spouting, and the pools themselves gleamed like newly polished mirrors in the midday light. The winding pathways of crushed white stone were as neat as if gardeners had come out this very morning to tidy them. Perhaps, he thought, surprised at himself for being able to summon even an atom of playfulness amidst these terrible surroundings, it was the estate's gardeners who had organized the uprising here, and they had taken care to have the attack bypass the grounds to which they had devoted so much of their energy. But more probably it had simply been more effective to break into the manor-house from the opposite side.

He stood for a time clutching the cool marble rail of the terrace, looking out into the immaculate garden and trying to focus on the problems that now confronted him. But no answers came. He had come up north to Getfen House for what was supposed to be a happy coming-of-age trip, a southern boy learning new ways far from home, making new friends, subtly forging alliances that would stand him in good stead in his adult life ahead. It had all gone so well. The Getfens had gathered him in as though he were one of their own. Joseph had even quietly fallen in love, although he had kept all that very much to himself, with his beautiful gentle golden-haired cousin Kesti. Now Kesti and all the Getfens were dead; and here he was at Ludbrek House, where he had hoped he would find an exit from the tumult that had engulfed this land, and everything was ruined here too, and no exit was in sight. Truly a coming-of-age trip, Joseph thought. But not in any way that he had imagined it would be.

And then as he stood there pondering these things he thought he heard a sound down toward his left, a creaking board, perhaps, a thump or two, as if someone were moving around in one of the lower levels of the shattered building. Another thump. Another.

Joseph stiffened. Those unexpected creaks and thumps rose up over the icy deathly silence that prevailed here as conspicuously as though what he was hearing was the pounding of drums.

"Who is it?" he called instantly. "Who's there?" And regretted that at once. He realized that he had unthinkingly spoken in Master: an addlepated mistake, possibly a fatal one if that happened to be a rebel sentry who was marching around down there.

Quickly all was silent again.

Not a sentry, no. A straggler, he thought. A survivor. Perhaps even a fugitive like himself. It had to be. There were no rebels left here, or he would have caught sight of them by this time. They had done their work and they had moved on. If they were still here they would be openly patrolling the grounds, not skulking around in the cellars like that, and they would not recoil into instant wary silence at the sound of a human voice, either. A Master's voice at that. Rebels would be up here in a moment to see who was speaking.

So who was it, then? Joseph wondered if that could be one of the Ludbreks down there, someone who had managed to survive the massacre of his House and had been hiding here ever since. Was that too wild a thing to consider? He had to know.

Checking it out alone and unarmed, though, was a crazy thing to do. Moving faster than was really good for his injured leg, he doubled back toward the front of the gutted house, following his own trail in the ashes. As he emerged from the vestibule he beckoned to the Indigenes, who were waiting where he had left them and did not seem to have moved at all in his absence. They were unarmed also, of course, and inherently peaceful people as well, but they had great physical strength and he was sure they would protect him if any kind of trouble should manifest itself.

"There's someone alive here, hidden away below the building," Joseph told them. "I heard the sounds he was making. Come help me find him."

They followed unquestioningly. He led them back through the dark immensities of the ruined house and out onto the terrace, and jabbed a pointing finger downward. "There," Joseph said. "Under the terrace."

A curving stone staircase linked the terrace to the garden. Joseph descended, with the Indigenes close behind. There was a whole warren of subterranean chambers beneath the terrace, he saw, that opened out onto the garden. Perhaps these rooms had been used for the storage of tables and utensils for the lawn parties that the Masters of Ludbrek House had enjoyed in days gone by. They were mostly empty now. Joseph stared in.

"Over there, Master Joseph," Ulvas said.

The Indigene's eyesight was better adapted to darkness than his. Joseph saw nothing. But as he moved cautiously inward he heard a sound—a little shuffling sound, perhaps—and then a cough, and then a quavering voice was addressing him in a muddled mixture of Folkish and Master, imploring him to be merciful with a poor old man, begging him to show compassion: "I have committed no crimes. I have done nothing wrong, I promise you that. Do not hurt me, please. Please. Do not hurt me."

"Come out where I can see you," Joseph said, in Master.

Out of the musty darkness came a stooped slow-moving figure, an old man indeed, sixty or perhaps even seventy years old, dressed in rags, with coarse matted hair that had cobwebs in it, and great smudges of dirt on his face. Plainly he was of the Folk. He had the thick shoulders and deep chest of the Folk, and the broad wide-nostrilled nose, and the heavy jaw. He must have been very strong, once. A field-serf, Joseph supposed. His frame was still powerful. But now he looked haggard and feeble, his face grayish beneath all the dirt, his cheeks hanging in loose folds as though he had eaten nothing in days, dark shadows below his haunted red-streaked eyes. Blinking, trembling, terrified-looking, he advanced with uncertain wavering steps toward Joseph, halted a few feet away, sank slowly to his knees before him.

"Spare me!" he cried, looking down at Joseph's feet. "I am guilty of nothing! Nothing!"

"You are in no danger, old man. Look up at me. Yes, that's right. —I tell you, no harm will come to you."

"You are truly a Master?" the man asked, as though fearing that Joseph were some sort of apparition.

"Truly I am."

"You do not look like other Masters I have seen. But yet you speak their language. You have the bearing of a Master. Of which House are you, Master?"

"House Keilloran."

"House Keilloran," the old man repeated. He had obviously never heard the name before.

"It is in Helikis," said Joseph, still speaking in Master. "That is in the south." Then, this time using Folkish, he said: "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"I am Waerna of Ludbrek. This is my home."

"This is nobody's home now."

"Not now, no. Not any more. But I have never known any other. My home is here, Master. When the others left, I stayed behind, for where would I go? What would I do?" A distraught look came into the bloodshot brown eyes. "They killed all the Masters, do you know that, Master? I saw it happen. It was in the night. Master Vennek was the first to die, and then Master Huist, Master Seebod, Master Graene, and all the wives, and the children also. All of them. And even their dogs. The wives and children had to watch while they killed the men, and then they were killed too. It was Vaniye who did it. I heard him say, 'Kill them all, leave no Master alive.' Vaniye who was practically like a son to Master Vennek. They killed everyone with knives, and then they burned the bodies, and they burned the house also. And then they went away, but I stayed, for where would I go? This is my place. My wife is long dead. My daughter as well. I have no one. I could not leave. I am of Ludbrek House."

"Indeed you are all that remains of Ludbrek House," said Joseph, barely able to contain the sadness he felt.

The old man's teeth were chattering. He huddled miserably into himself and a great convulsive quiver went rippling through him. He must be right at the edge of starvation, Joseph thought. He asked the Indigenes to fetch some food for him. One of the two drivers went back to the wagon and returned with smoked meat, dried berries, a little flask of the milky-colored Indigene wine. Waerna contemplated the food with interest but also with a certain show of hesitation. Joseph thought it might be because Indigene food was unfamiliar to him, but that was not it at all: it was only that he had not eaten anything in so long that his stomach was rebelling at the mere idea of food. The old man nibbled at the fruit and took a tentative sip of the wine. After that it was easier, and he ate steadily, though not greedily, one bite after another until everything before him was gone.

Some color was returning to his cheeks now. He seemed already to be regaining his strength. He looked up at Joseph and said, almost tearfully, "You are very kind, Master. I have never known Masters to be anything but kind. When they killed the Masters here, I felt as though they were ripping my own heart out of my body." And then, in a different tone, a new thought suddenly occurring: "But why are you here, Master? This is no place for you to visit. It is not safe for you, here."

"I am only passing through these parts. Traveling south, to my home in Helikis."

"But how will you do that? If they find you, they will kill you. They are killing Masters everywhere."

"Everywhere?" said Joseph, thinking of Keilloran.

"Everywhere. It was the plan, and now they have done it. The Masters of House Ludbrek and those of House Getfen and those of House Siembri for certain, and I heard House Fyelk also, and House Odum, and House Garn. It was the plan to rise up against all the Great Houses of Manza, and burn the buildings, and kill all the Masters. As I saw done here. And they have done it, this I know. Dead, dead, everyone dead in all the Houses, or nearly so. Roads have been closed. Rebel patrols search for those who escaped the slaughter." Waerna was trembling again. He seemed on the verge of tears.

Joseph felt a sudden terrifying flood of despair himself. He had not left room in his spirit for this disappointment. Having from the beginning of his flight into the woods expected to find succor at Ludbrek House, an end to his solitary travail and the beginning of his return to his home and family, and discovering instead nothing but ashes and ruination and this shattered old man, he found himself struggling to maintain equilibrium in his soul. It was not easy. A vision rose before him of a chain of charred and desolate manor-houses stretching all the way south to the Isthmus, triumphant Folkish rebels controlling the roads everywhere, the last few surviving Masters hunted down one by one and given over to death.

He looked toward Ulvas and said, speaking in Indigene, "He tells me that all the Houses everywhere in Manza have been destroyed."

"Perhaps that is not so, Master Joseph," said the Indigene gently.

"But what if it is? What am I to do, if it is?" Joseph's voice sounded weirdly shrill in his own ears. For the moment he felt as helpless and forlorn as old Waerna. This was new to him, this weakness, this fear. He had not known that he was capable of such feelings. But of course he had never been tested in this way. "How will I manage? Where will I go?"

As soon as the shameful words had escaped his lips, Joseph wanted passionately to call them back. It was the first time since the night of the massacre at Getfen House that he had allowed any show of uncertainty over the ultimate success of his journey to break through into the open. "You must never deceive yourself about the difficulties you face," Balbus had often told him, "but neither should you let yourself be taken prisoner by fear." Joseph had known from the start that it would be no easy thing to find his way alone across this unfamiliar continent to safety, but he had been taught to meet each day's challenges as they arose, and so he had. Whenever doubts had begun to come drifting up out of the depths of his mind he had been able to shove them back. This time, confronted with the harsh reality of the gutted Ludbrek House, he had allowed them to master him, if only for a moment. But, he told himself sternly, he should never have let such thoughts take form in his mind in the first place, let alone voice them before Indigenes and a man of the Folk.

The moment passed. His outburst drew no response from the Indigenes. Perhaps they took his anguished questions as rhetorical ones, or else they simply had no answers for them.

Quickly Joseph felt his usual calmness and self-assurance return. All this, he thought, is part of my education, even when I let myself give way to the weakness that is within me. Everyone has some area of weakness within him somewhere. You must not let it rule you, that is all. What is happening here is that I am learning who I am.

But he understood now that he had to abandon hope, at least for the time being, of continuing onward to the south. Maybe Waerna was correct that all the Great Houses of Manza had fallen, maybe not; but either way he could not ask Ulvas and his companions to risk their lives transporting him any farther, nor did it seem to make much sense to set out from here by himself. Aside from all the other problems he might face as he made his way through the rebel-held territory to the south, his leg had not yet healed well enough for him to attempt the journey on his own. The only rational choice that was open to him was to go back to the Indigene village and use that as his base while trying to work out his next move.

He offered to take Waerna along with him. But the old man would not be removed from this place. Ludbrek House, or what was left of it, was his home. He had been born here, he said, and he would die here. There could be no life for him anywhere else.

Probably that was so, Joseph thought. He tried to imagine Waerna living among the rebels who had killed the Masters of this House, those Masters whom Waerna had so loved, and brought destruction to their properties, to the upkeep of which Waerna had dedicated his whole life. No, he thought, no, Waerna had done the right thing in separating himself from those people. He was Folk to the core, a loyal member of a system that did not seem to exist any more. Thustin had been like that too. There was no place for the Waernas and the Thustins in the strange new world that the rebels were creating here in Manza.

Joseph gave Waerna as much food as Ulvas thought they could spare, and embraced him with such warmth and tenderness that the old man looked up at him in disbelief. Then he set out on his way back north. He would not let himself dwell on the fact that every rotation of the wagon-wheels was taking him farther from his home. Probably it had been folly all along to imagine that his journey from Getfen House to Keilloran would be a simple straight-line affair down the heart of Manza to Helikis.

The weather was starting to change, he saw, as he headed back to the village: a coolish wind was blowing out of the south, a sign that the rainy season was on its way.

Joseph wished he knew more of what to expect of the weather of High Manza, now that there was a real possibility that he might still be here as winter arrived. How cold would it get? Would it snow? He had never seen snow, only pictures of it, and he was not particularly eager to make its acquaintance just now. Well, he would find out, he supposed.

The Ardardin did not seem greatly surprised to see Joseph returning to the village. Surprise did not appear to be a characteristic that played a very important role in the emotional makeup of the Indigenes, or else Joseph simply did not know how they normally expressed it. But the matter-of-fact greeting that Joseph received from the Ardardin led him to think that the tribal leader might well have expected from the beginning to be seeing him again before long. He wondered just how much the Ardardin actually knew about the reach and success of the Folkish uprising.

The Ardardin did not ask him for details of his expedition to Ludbrek House. Nor did Joseph volunteer any, other than to say that he had found no one at Ludbrek House who could give him any assistance. He did not feel like being more specific with the Indigene chieftain. For the moment it was all too painful to speak about. Ulvas and the others who had accompanied him would surely provide the Ardardin with details of the destruction.

Once he was established again in the room that had been his before, Joseph tried once more to make contact via combinant with Keilloran. He had no more hope of success than before, but the sight of devastated Ludbrek had kindled a fierce desire in him to discover what, if anything, had been taking place on the other continent and to let his family know that he had not perished in the uprising that had broken out in Manza.

This time the device produced a strange sputtering sound and a dim pink glow. Neither of these was in any way a normal effect. But at least the combinant was producing something, now, whereas it had done nothing whatever since the night of the burning of Getfen House. Perhaps some part of the system was working again.

He said, "I am Joseph Master Keilloran, and I am calling my father, Martin Master Keilloran of House Keilloran in Helikis." If the combinant was working properly, that statement alone would suffice to connect him instantly. He stared urgently into the pink glow, wishing that he were seeing the familiar blue of a functioning combinant instead. "Father, can you hear me? This is Joseph. I am somewhere in High Manza, Father, a hundred miles or so south of Getfen House."

He paused, hoping for a reply.

Nothing. Nothing.

"They have killed everyone in Getfen House, and in other Houses too. I have been to Ludbrek House, which is south of the Getfen lands, and everything is in ruins there. An old serf told me that all the Ludbreks are dead. —Do you hear me, Father?"

Useless pink glow. Sputtering hissing sound.

"I want to tell you, Father, that I am all right. I hurt my leg in the forest but it's healing nicely now, and the Indigenes are looking after me. I'm staying in the first Indigene village due south of the Getfens. When my leg is better, I'm going to start out for home again, and I hope to see you very soon. Please try to reply to me. Please keep trying every day."

The thought came to him then that what he had just said could have been very rash, that perhaps the combinant system of Manza was in rebel hands, in which case they might have intercepted his call and possibly could trace it to this very village. In that case he could very well have doomed himself just now.

That was a chilling thought. It was becoming a bad habit of his, he saw, to speak without fully thinking through all consequences of his words. But, once again, there was no way he could unsay what he had just said. And maybe this enterprise of his, this immense trek across Manza, was doomed to end in failure sooner or later anyway, in which case what difference did it make that he might have just called the rebels down upon himself? At least there was a chance that the call would go through to Keilloran, that his words would reach his father and provide him with some comfort. The message might even set in motion the forces of rescue. It was a risk worth taking, he decided.

He undid his bandages and examined his leg. It still looked bad. The swelling had gone down, and the bruises had diminished considerably, the angry zones of purplish-black now a milder mottling of brownish-yellow. But when he sat on the edge of his bed of furs and swung the leg carefully back and forth, his knee made a disagreeable little clicking sound and hot billows of pain went shooting along his thigh. Perhaps there was no permanent damage, but he was scarcely in shape for a long trek on his own yet.

Joseph asked for a basin of water and washed the leg thoroughly. Ulvas provided him with a fresh length of cloth so that he could bandage it again.

For the next few days they left him largely to his own devices. The faithful Ulvas brought him food regularly, but he had no other visitors. Now and then village children gathered in the hall outside the open door of his room and studied him intently, as though he were some museum exhibit or perhaps a sideshow freak. They never said a word. There was a flinty steadfast intensity to their little slitted eyes. When Joseph tried to speak with them, they turned and ran.

He resumed his studies, finally, after the long interruption, calling up his geography text and searching it for information about the climate and landscape of the continent of Manza, and then going into his history book to read once again the account of the Conquest. It was important to him now to understand why the Folk had suddenly turned with such violence against their overlords, after so many centuries of quiescent acceptance of Master rule.

But the textbook offered him no real guidance. All it contained was the traditional account, telling how the Folk had come to Homeworld in the early days of the colonization of the worlds of space and taken up a simple life of farming, which had degenerated after a couple of centuries into a bare subsistence existence because they were a dull, backward people who lacked the technical skills to exploit the soil and water of their adopted world properly. At least they were intelligent enough to understand that they needed help, though, and after a time they had invited people of the Master stock here to show them how to do things better, just a few Masters at first, but those had summoned others, and then, as the steadily increasing Masters began to explain to the Folk that there could be no real prosperity here unless the Folk allowed the Masters to take control of the means of production and put everything on a properly businesslike basis, a couple of hotheaded leaders appeared among the Folk and resistance broke out against Master influence, which led to the brief, bloody war known as the Conquest. That was the only instance in all of Homeworld's history, said the textbook, of friction between Folk and Masters. Once it was over the relationship between the two peoples settled into a stable and harmonious rhythm, each group understanding its place and playing its proper role in the life of the planet, and that was how things had remained for a very long time. Until, in fact, the outbreak of the current uprising.

Joseph understood why a truly dynamic, ambitious race would object to being conquered that way. He could not imagine the Masters, say, ever accepting the rule of invaders from space: they would fight on and on until all Homeworld was stained with blood, as it was said had happened in the time of the empires of Old Earth. But the Folk were in no way dynamic or ambitious. Before the Masters came, they had been slipping back into an almost prehistoric kind of life here. Under the rule of the Masters they were far more prosperous than they could ever have become on their own. And it was not as though they were slaves, after all. They had full rights and privileges. No one forced them to do anything. It was to their great benefit, as well as the Masters', for them to perform the tasks that were allotted them in the farms and factories. Master and Folk worked together for the common good: Joseph had heard his father say that a thousand times. He believed it. Every Master did. So far as Joseph knew, the Folk believed it too.

Because the system had always seemed to work so well, Joseph had never had any reason to look upon his own people as oppressors, or on the Folk as victims of aggression. Now, though, the system was not working at all. Joseph wished he could discuss the recent events in Manza with Balbus. Were the rebels mere brutal killers, or could there be some substance to their resentments? Joseph could see no justification, ever, for killing and burning, but from the rebels' point of view those things might well have seemed necessary. He did not know. He had lived too sheltered a life; he had never had occasion to question any of its basic assumptions. But now, suddenly, everything was called into question. *Everything.* He was too young and inexperienced to wrestle with these problems on his own. He needed someone older, someone with more perspective, with whom to discuss them. Someone like Balbus, yes. But Balbus was gone.

Unexpectedly Joseph found himself drifting, a few days later, into a series of conversations with the Ardardin that reminded him of his discussions with his late tutor. The Ardardin had taken to visiting him often in the afternoons. Now that Joseph had taken up residence in the village once more, his services as a healer were needed again, and the Ardardin would come to him and conduct him to the village infirmary, where some villager with a running sore, or a throbbing pain in his head, or a mysterious swelling on his thigh, would be waiting for Joseph to cure him.

Joseph did not even try to struggle against his unwanted role as a healer now. It no longer embarrassed him to be engaging in such pretense. If that was the role they wanted him to play, why, he would play it as well as he could, and do it with a straight face. For one thing, his ministrations often seemed to bring about cures, even though he had only the most rudimentary of medical technique and no real notion of how to cope with most of the ailments that were presented to him. These Indigenes appeared to be a suggestible people. They had such faith in his skills that a mere laying on of hands, a mere murmuring of words, frequently did the job. He became accustomed to seeing such inexplicable things happen. That did not instill in him any belief in his own magical powers, only an awareness that faith could sometimes work miracles regardless of the cynicism of the miracle-worker. And his magical cures justified his presence among them in his own eyes. He was eating these people's food and taking up space in their village as he hobbled around waiting for his leg to heal. The least he could do for them was to give them succor for their ills, so long as they felt that such succor was within his power to give. What he had to watch out for was beginning to believe in the reality of his own powers.

Another thing that troubled him occasionally was the possibility that his medical services were becoming of such value to the villagers that they would keep him among them even after he was strong enough to get on his way. They had no reason to care whether he ever returned to his home or not, and every reason to want to maintain him in their midst forever.

That was not a problem he needed to deal with now. Meanwhile he was making himself of use here; he was performing a worthwhile function, and that was no trivial thing. The whole purpose of this trip to the northern continent had been to prepare him for the tasks that someday would be his as Master of House Keilloran, and, though his father certainly had not ever imagined that ministering to the medical needs of a village of Indigenes would be part of that preparation, it was clear enough to Joseph that that was something entirely appropriate for a Master-in-the-making to undertake. He would not shirk his responsibilities here. Especially not for such an unworthy reason. The Indigenes would let him go, he was sure, when the time came.

The more doctoring he did, the more adventuresome he became about the things he would try that could be regarded by him as genuine medicine, and not just mere faith-healing. Joseph did not feel ready to perform any kind of major surgery, and did not ever think he would be; but, using the few simple tools he found in his utility case, he started stitching up minor wounds, now, and lancing infections, and pulling decayed teeth. One thing he feared was that they would ask him to deliver a child, a task for which he lacked even the most basic knowledge. But they never did. Whatever process it was by which these people brought their young into the world continued to be a mystery to him.

He began to learn something about Indigene herbal medicine, also, and used it to supplement the kind of work he was already doing. It puzzled him that the Indigenes should have developed the use of such a wide range of drugs and potions without also having managed to invent even the simplest of mechanical medical techniques. They could not do surgery, they could not suture a wound, they could not set a fracture. But they had succeeded in finding natural medicines capable of reducing fever, of easing pain, of unblocking a jammed digestive tract, and much more of that sort. Their ignorance of the mechanical side of medicine, amounting almost to indifference, was one more example, Joseph thought, of their alien nature. They are simply not like us. Not just their bodies are different, but their minds.

His instructor in the use of Indigene herbs was a certain Thiyu, the village's master in this art. Joseph never found out whether Thiyu was male or female, but it was certain, at least, that Thiyu was old. You could see that in the faded tone of Thiyu's bronze skin, from which all the orange highlights had disappeared, and from the slack, puffy look of Thiyu's throat-pouch, which seemed to have lost the capacity to inflate. And Thiyu's voice was thin and frayed, like a delicate cord just at the verge of snapping in two.

In Thiyu's hut behind the infirmary were a hundred different identical-looking ceramic jars, all of them unmarked, each containing a different powder or juice that Thiyu had extracted from some native plant. How the Indigene knew what drug was contained in which jar was something Joseph never understood. He would describe to Thiyu the case he was currently working on, and Thiyu would go to the collection of jars and locate an appropriate medicine for him, and that was that.

Aware that knowledge of these drugs was valuable, Joseph made a point of asking Thiyu the name of each one used, and its properties, and a description of the plant from which it was derived. He carefully wrote all these things down. Bringing this information to his fellow Masters, if ever he returned to his own people again, would be part of the service that a Master must render to the world. Had any Master ever bothered, he wondered, to study Indigene medicine before?

He and Thiyu never spoke of anything but herbs and potions, and that only in the briefest possible terms. There was no conversation between them. Nor was there with any of the others, not even Ulvas. The Ardardin was the only Indigene in the village with whom Joseph had anything like a friendship. After Joseph had done his day's work in the infirmary the Ardardin often would accompany him back to his room, and gradually it fell into the habit of remaining for a while to talk with him.

The themes were wide-ranging, though always superficial. They would speak of Helikis, a place about which the Ardardin seemed to know almost nothing, or about the problems the Ardardin's people had had this summer with their crops, or the work Joseph was doing in the infirmary, or the improving condition of his leg, or the weather, or the sighting of some rarely seen wild animal in the vicinity of the village, but never about anything that had to do with Indigene-human relationships, or the civil war now going on between Masters and Folk. The Ardardin set the pace, and Joseph very swiftly saw which kinds of topics were appropriate and which were out of bounds.

The Ardardin seemed to enjoy these talks, to get definite pleasure from them, as though it had long been starved for intelligent company in this village before Joseph's arrival. Joseph was surprised to find that they were talking as equals, in a sense, sitting face to face and exchanging ideas and information on a one-to-one basis, although he was only a half-grown fugitive boy and the Ardardin was a person of stature and authority, the leader of the village. But maybe the Ardardin did not realize how young Joseph really was. Of course, Joseph was a Master, a person of rank among his own people, the heir to a great estate somewhere far away. But there was no reason why the Ardardin would be impressed by that. Was it that he was functioning as the tribal doctor? Maybe. More likely, though, the Ardardin was simply extending to him the courtesy that it felt one adult intelligent creature owed another. There was, at any rate, a certain sense of equality for Joseph in their talks. He found it flattering. No one had ever spoken to Joseph in that way before. He took it as a high compliment.

Then the nature of his conversations with the Ardardin began to change. It was an almost imperceptible transformation. Joseph could not say how the change began, nor why the talks now became fixed on a single daily subject, which was the religious beliefs of the Indigenes and the light that those beliefs cast on the ultimate destiny of all the creatures of Homeworld. The result was a distinct alteration of the parity of the meetings. Now, once more, Joseph was back in the familiar role of the student listening to the master. Though the Ardardin seemed to be treating him as a scholar seeking information, not as a novice stumbling about in the darkness of his own ignorance, Joseph had no illusions about the modification of their relationship.

Perhaps it was a reference that the Ardardin made one afternoon to "the visible sky" and "the real sky" that had started it.

"But the visible sky *is* the real sky," said Joseph, mystified. "Is that not so?"

"Ah," said the Ardardin. "The sky that we see is a trivial simple thing. What has true meaning is the sky beyond it, the sky of the gods, the celestial sky."

Joseph had problems in following this. He was fluent enough in Indigene, but the abstract concepts that the Ardardin was dealing in now involved him in a lot of new terminology, ideas that he had never had to deal with before, and as the discussion unfolded he had to ask for frequent clarifications. Bit by bit he grasped the distinction that the Ardardin was making: the universe of visible phenomena on the one hand, and the much more significant universe of celestial forces, where the gods dwelled, on the other. It was the gods who dwelled in the *real* sky, the one that could not be seen by mortal eyes, but which generated the power by which the universe was held together.

That the Indigenes should have gods came as no surprise to Joseph. *All* peoples had gods of some sort. But he knew nothing whatever about theirs. No texts of Indigene mythology had ever come his way. In Keilloran there were Indigenes living all around; you constantly encountered them; and yet, Joseph saw now, they were so much taken for granted as part of the landscape that he had never paid any real attention to them, other than to learn the language, which was something that every Master was required to do. His father collected their artifacts, yes. But you could fill entire storehouses with pots and sculptures and weavings and still not know anything about a people's *soul*. And though Balbus had said that Martin had studied Indigene philosophy as well, he had never shared a syllable of his findings with his son.

Joseph strained to penetrate the mysteries that the Ardardin was expounding now, wondering whether these were the things that his father supposedly had studied. Perhaps not. Perhaps they had never been shared with a person of human blood before.

The world that surrounds us, the Ardardin said, its mountains and seas and rivers and forests, its cities and fields, its every tangible aspect, is the terrestrial counterpart of the celestial world in the sky. That world is the world of the gods, the *true* world, of which the world of living beings was a mere pallid imitation. Everything we see about us, said the Ardardin, represents the crude attempts of mortal beings to replicate the gods' own primordial act of creating their own world.

"Do you follow?" the Ardardin said.

"Not exactly," said Joseph.

The Ardardin did not appear troubled by that. It went on speaking of things that were completely new to Joseph, the sacred mountain at the center of the world where the visible world and the invisible one come together, the axis upon which all things spin, the place where mundane time and mythical time meet, which is the navel of the world. The distinction between the time-scheme of living things and the time-scheme of the gods, worldly time and godly time, was obviously very important to the Indigenes. The Ardardin made it seem as though the world of ordinary phenomena was a mere film, an overlay, a stencil, a shallow and trivial thing although linked by the most powerful bonds to the divine world where fundamental reality dwelled.

All this was fascinating in its way, though Joseph's mind did not ordinarily tend in these metaphysical directions. There was a certain strange beauty to it, the way a mathematical theorem has great beauty even if you could not see any way of putting it to practical use. After each conversation with the Ardardin he would dictate notes into his recorder, setting down all that he had been told while it was still fresh in his mind. By so doing he reinforced in his own mind the belief that he would somehow get out of Manza alive, that he would return to Helikis and share with others the remarkable fund of alien knowledge that he had brought back with him.

Even the most abstruse mathematical theorem, Joseph knew, represents one valid way of describing the universe, at least to those capable of comprehending it. But Joseph could not help looking upon what the Ardardin was telling him as a mere collection of fables, quaint primitive myths. One could admire them, but on a fundamental level one could not believe them, certainly not in the way one believes that seven and six are thirteen, or that the square on the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares on the other two sides. Those things were inherently, incontrovertibly true. The tales the Ardardin told were metaphors, ingenious inventions. They described nothing real. That did not make them any the less interesting, Joseph felt. But they had no relevance to him, so far as he could see, other than as curiosities of an alien civilization.

His talks with the Ardardin had gone on nearly a week before the Indigene abruptly stepped behind the legends and drew the astonished Joseph into the entirely unexpected realm of political reality.

"Your people call yourselves Masters," the Ardardin said. "Why is that? What is it that you are masters of?"

Joseph hesitated. "Why, the world," he replied. "This world, I mean. To use your terms, the *visible* world."

"Very good, yes. Masters of the visible world. Do you see, though, that to be masters of the visible world is a thing that has very little actual importance?"

"To us it does," said Joseph.

"To you, yes. But not to us, for the visible world itself is nothing, so what value is there in being masters of it? I mean no discourtesy here. I wish only to put before you something that I believe you should consider, which is that *your people do not hold possession of anything real.* You call yourselves Masters, but in truth you are masters of nothing. Certainly not *our* masters; and from the way things seem, perhaps not even the masters of the people you call the Folk, any more. I cannot speak of those people. But to us, Master Joseph, you Masters have never had any significant existence at all."

Joseph was lost. "Our cities—our roads—"

"Visible things. Temporary things. Not godly things. Not truly real."

"What about the work I do in the infirmary? People are sick. Their pain is real, would you not say? I touch a sick person with my hands, and that person gets better. Isn't that real? Is it only some kind of illusion?"

"It is a secondary kind of reality," said the Ardardin. "We live in the true reality here. The reality of the gods."

Joseph's head was swimming. He remembered Balbus telling him that there was something in the Indigene religion that had allowed them to regard the presence of human settlers among them as completely unimportant—as though Masters and Folk had never come here in the first place. They simply shrugged it off. It seemed clear that the Ardardin was approaching that area of discourse now. But without Balbus, he was lost. These abstractions were beyond him.

The Ardardin said, "I do not mean to minimize the things you have done for us since your arrival in our village. As for your people, it is true that they seem to have the powers of gods. You fly between the stars like gods. You came down like gods among us out of the heavens. You talk across great distances, which seems magical to us. You build cities and roads with the greatest of ease. You have ways of healing that are unknown to us. Yes, the things that you Masters have achieved on our world are great things indeed, in their way. You could have every reason to think of yourselves as gods. But even if you do—and I don't say that that is so—do you think that this is the first time that gods, or beings like gods, have come among us?"

Bewildered, Joseph said, "Other visitors from space, you mean?"

"From the heavens," said the Ardardin. "From the sky beyond the sky, the celestial sky, the true sky that is forever beyond our reach. In the early days of time they came down to us, minor gods, teaching-gods, the ones who showed us how to construct our houses and plant our crops and make tools and utensils."

"Yes. Culture-heroes, we call them."

"They did their work, and then they went away. They were only temporary gods, subordinate gods. The true gods of the celestial sky are the only enduring gods, and they do not allow us to see them. Whenever it is necessary to do so, the high gods send these subordinate gods to us to reveal godly ways to us. We do not confuse these gods with the real ones. What these lesser gods do is imitate the things the high gods do in the world that we are unable to see, and, where it is suitable, we learn those things themselves by imitating the lesser gods that imitate the greater ones. You who call yourselves Masters: you are just the latest of these emissaries from the high gods. Not the first. Not the last."

Joseph's eyes widened. "You see us as no more than a short-term phenomenon, then?"

"How can you be anything else? It is the way of the world. You will be here for a time and then you will pass from the scene, as other gods like you have done before you. For only the true gods are eternal. Do you begin to see, Master Joseph? Do you start to understand?"

"Yes. Yes, I think I do."

It was like a great door swinging open before him.

Now he comprehended the passivity of the Indigenes, their seeming indifference to the arrival of the Masters, and of the Folk before them. We do not matter to them, except insofar as we reflect the will of the gods. We are only shadows of the true reality, he thought. We are only transient reflections of the true gods. This is our little moment on this planet, and when it is over we will pass from the scene, and the Indigenes will remain, and the eternal gods in their heaven will remain as well.

Our time may be passing already, Joseph thought, seeing the blackened ruins of Ludbrek House rising before him in his mind. And he shivered.

"So the fact that we came down among you and took control of great sectors of your world and built our dams and our highways and all the rest is entirely unimportant to you," he said. "We don't matter to you in any way. Is that it?"

"You misunderstand, Master Joseph. Whatever the gods see fit to do is important to us. They have sent you to us for a purpose, though what that purpose is has not yet been made clear. You have done many good things, you have done some bad things, and it is up to us to discern the meaning of your presence on our world. Which we will do. We watch; we wait; we learn. And one day we will know why it was that you were sent to us."

"But we'll be gone by then."

"Surely so. Your cycle will have ended."

"Our cycle?"

"The world passes through a series of cycles. Each follows the last in a predetermined order. We are living now in a period of destruction, of disintegration. It will grow worse. We see the signs already. As the end of the cycle comes upon us, the year will be shortened, the month will diminish, and the day will contract. There will be darkness and fire; and then will come rebirth, a new dawn, the start of the new cycle."

This was more than indifference, Joseph realized.

This was a supremely confident dismissal of all the little petty pretensions of his people. Masters, indeed! To the Indigenes, Joseph saw, nothing mattered on this world except the Indigenes themselves, whose gods lay hidden in an invisible sky and comported themselves in altogether mysterious ways. The humans who had taken so much of this people's land were just one more passing nuisance, a kind of annoying natural phenomenon, comparable to a sandstorm, a flood, a shower of hail. We think we have been building a new civilization here, he thought. We try to behave kindly toward the Indigenes, but we look upon this planet as ours, now, no longer theirs: our Homeworld, we call it. Wrong. In the eyes of the Ardardin and his race we are a mere short-term phenomenon. We are instruments of their unknown gods, sent here to serve their needs, not our own.

Strange. Strange. Joseph wondered whether he would be able to explain any of this to his father, if ever he saw Keilloran House again.

He could not allow himself the luxury of these discursive conversations much longer, though. It was time to begin thinking seriously again of moving on toward the south. His leg was nearly back to normal now. And, though it was pleasant enough to be living in this friendly village and engaging in fine philosophical discussions with its chieftain, he knew he must not let himself be deflected from his essential purpose, which was to get home.

The situation beyond the boundaries of the Ardardin's village was continuing to worsen, apparently. Indigenes from other villages passed through here often, bringing reports on the troubles outside. Joseph never had the opportunity to speak with these visitors himself, but from the Ardardin he learned that all Manza had by now turned into a war zone: a great many Houses of the Masters throughout the northern continent had been destroyed, roads were closed, rebel troops were on the march everywhere. It appeared also that in certain parts of the continent the Masters were counterattacking, although that was still unclear. Joseph got the impression that fighting was going on between different groups of Folk, too, some loyal to the Masters, others sworn to uphold the rebellion. And bands of refugees were straggling south in an attempt to reach the Isthmus of Helikis and the safety that lay beyond. These must be surviving Masters, Joseph thought. But the Ardardin could not say. It had not seen a need to go into such a degree of detail with its informants.

None of this chaos seemed to cause much of a problem for the Indigenes themselves. By now Joseph had come to see how completely their lives were bound up in their villages, and in the tenuous ties that linked one village to the next. So long as nobody's troops came swarming across their fields and their harvests went well, the struggles of Masters and Folk were matters of little import to them. His discussions with the Ardardin had made it clear to him why they had that attitude.

Commerce between the Indigene villages, therefore, still was proceeding as though nothing unusual were going on. The Ardardin proposed to turn that fact to Joseph's benefit. Other villages down the line would surely have need of Joseph's services as a healer. Now that he was capable of traveling, they would convey him to one of the nearby villages, where he could take care of whatever medical problems might need his attention there, and then those villagers would take him on to the next village, and so on and so on until he had reached a point from which he could cross over into the safety of Helikis.

Joseph, remembering his fears that the Ardardin's people might not allow him to leave at all, felt a burst of chagrin, and gratitude also for the Ardardin's kind willingness to help him along his way like this.

But it occurred to him that it might be just as wrong to imagine kindness here as it had been to fear enslavement earlier. It was a mistake, he realized, to ascribe conventional human feelings—altruism, selfishness, whatever—to Indigenes, indeed to interpret their motivations in any way analogous to human thinking. He had been guilty of that again and again in his dealings with the Ardardin and the villagers; but he knew by this time that it was something to avoid. They were alien beings. They had followed a wholly different evolutionary path for millions of years. They walk on their hind legs like us, he thought, and they have a language with nouns and verbs in it, and they know how to plant and harvest crops and fashion pottery, but that did not make them human in any essential way, and one had best take them on their own terms or else not try to take them at all.

He had another taste of that when it was time for him to go. He had imagined that there might be a fairly emotional farewell, but the silliness of that bit of self-deception quickly became evident. The Ardardin expressed no regret whatever at Joseph's departure and no hint that any sort of friendship had sprung up between the two of them: not a syllable of thanks for his work in the infirmary, none for their afternoon conversations. It simply stood looking on in silence while Joseph climbed into the wagon that would take him once again toward the south, and when the wagon pulled out of the village compound the Ardardin turned and went inside, and that was as much of a farewell as Joseph had.

They are not like us, Joseph thought. To them we are mere transient phenomena. ○

(Continued in next issue)

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The DC area rejoins the convention circuit, with CapClave and our own Gardner. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

SEPTEMBER 2001

13–16—**Poland National Con.** For info, write: **skr. Poczt 502, Katowice 40-946, Poland.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.skf.from.hell.pl. (E-mail) skf@skf.from.hell.pl**. Con will be held in: Katowice (if city omitted, same as in address) at a venue TBA. Guests to include: Silverberg.

14–16—**Cinema Wasteland. www.videowasteland.com/show.** Holiday Inn, Strongsville OH. Sullivan. Film fans.

14–16—**Cavalcade. (01947) 821-7111.** Spa Pavillion, Whitby, N. Yorks., England. UK costumers' annual con.

15–16—**VulKon. (954) 441-8735.** Airport Sheraton, Ft. Lauderdale FL. B. Campbell. Commercial Trek event.

15–16—**Resurrection. www.vortex-events.freeserve.co.uk/events.** Moat House, Stoke-on-Trent UK. Dr. Who.

20–23—**GateCon. (719) 574-6427.** Best Western Richmond Inn, Vancouver BC. Rothery, Stait. StarGate SG1.

21–23—**ValleyCon. (218) 233-4046.** Quality Inn, Fargo ND. J. G. Hertzler, S. Rosema, A. Burbeck-Gould.

21–23—**FreeCon. (Web) freecon.tripod. com.** Ramada Inn, East Lansing MI. Free admission.

21–23—**Nan Desu Con. www.ndk.cc.** Sheraton, Lakewood (Denver) CO. S. Frazier, S. Bennett IV. Anime.

21–23—**Anime Weekend. (404) 364-9773.** Sheraton/GA Conv. Center, Atlanta GA. M. Iijima, T. Grant, C. Orr.

21–23—**Oxonmoot. www.tolkiensociety.org.** Oxford England. UK Tolkien fans' annual con. About 100 people.

22–23—**HypothetiCon. secretary@hypotheticon2001.co.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. No more on this at press time.

27–30—**Spain National Con, c/o Celestino Junquera, Gijon 33201, Spain. (Web) salduba2001.8k. com/.** Zaragoza.

28–30—**CapClave, c/o Gilliland, 4030 8th St. S., Arlington VA 22204. www.wsfa.org/.** Beltsville MD. G. Dozois.

28–30—**Arcana, Box 8036, Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 721-5959.** Holiday Inn, St. Paul MN. Written SF.

28–30—**Foolscap, c/o Box 2461, Seattle WA 98111. (206) 301-9630.** Southcenter, Tukwila WA. P. & K. Foglio.

28–30—**FilkContinental, c/o Drîge, Wielandstr. 28, Hamburg 22089, Germany. www.filk.de.** Freusburg. Music.

OCTOBER 2001

5–7—**Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. (314) 326-3026.** Gateway Ctr., Collinsville IL. Cherry, Jackson.

5–7—**AlbaCon, Box 2085, Albany NY 12220. www.albacon.org.** Ramada, Schenectady. Niven, Eggleton, Atwood.

5–7—**ConText, Box 163391, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 889-0426.** Trueman Club Hotel. Haldemans. Written SF.

5–7—**Maquis Gras, Box 1101, Portage IN 46368. (219) 759-2272.** Ramada. G. Walsh, Robin Curtis. Star Trek.

5–7—**Animagic, Box 221, Lancaster CA 93584. www.ani-magic.org/.** Best Western Antelope Valley Inn. Anime.

5–7—**Retribution, Box 1701, London SW6 5WU, UK. www.supernovaconventions.com.** Radisson Heathrow. Trek.

6–7—**VulKon, Box 821673, So. Florida FL 33082. (954) 441-8735.** Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. Commercial Trek.

7—**Sisters in Crime, Box 251646, Los Angeles CA 90025. (213) 694-2972.** Barre, Fowler, Neri. Mystery fiction.

12–14—**ConClave, Box 2915, Ann Arbor MI 48106. www.conclavesf.org.** Holiday Inn South, Lansing MI.

AUGUST 2002

29–Sep. 2—**ConJose, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088. www.conjose@sfsfc.org.** San Jose CA. WorldCon. $140.

AUGUST 2003

28–Sep. 1—**TorCon 3, Box 3, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1A2. www.torcon3.on.ca.** WorldCon. C$170/US$115.

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NEXT ISSUE

DECEMBER LEAD STORIES

By long tradition, December is our Special Holiday Issue. It features *two* Christmas-related stories, of very different sorts. as well as tales that take us far from ho-ho-ho territory. The first is by the Queen of Christmas Stories, the only SF writer to have ever published an all-Christmas-story collection (*Miracle and Other Christmas Stories* . . . most of the content of which appeared for the first time right here in *Asimov's*), and a writer who *also* happens to be the most-honored author in the history of the field, multiple Hugo and Nebula award-winner **Connie Willis.** In her witty and sparkling novella called "deck.halls@boughs/holly," she takes us to a frazzled and frantically busy future for a fast-paced screwball comedy of people trying to hang on to some kind of values in a Future Shocked world where everything is in constant flux . . . and, of course, this being a Connie Willis comedy, there's a tale of star-crossed and unlikely love at it's heart. . . . This is warm, clever, and funny, perfect for Holiday Viewing; you won't want to miss it. Our other Christmas-related story is a tale of a very different sort. **Kage Baker,** one of our most frequent contributors, returns with another of her popular stories about the agents of the time-traveling Company, this one taking us *ahead* in time (from our present-day perspective) to visit a Winter Solstice feast, where the story of "The Applesauce Monster," a story of somber power and deep emotional impact, soon begins to play itself out; be warned that *this* one will *not* make visions of sugarplums dance in your head, but it may well haunt your dreams for a long time to come.

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

This issue *also* features part two of **Robert Silverberg's** powerful new novel, **The Longest Way Home.** A young man being hunted across the face of a strange planet must face physical dangers, plus a challenge to everything he *thinks* he knows about the world as well. (Do we need to remind you that Silverberg is a multiple Hugo and Nebula Award-winner, and one of the true giants of the field? If we did, consider yourself reminded!) Popular British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxter** paints a melancholy portrait of a *very* out-of-place stranger doomed to live out her life upon the "Grey Earth"; World Fantasy Award-winner **John M. Ford** returns after a long absence to take us on a daring and dangerous expedition to the edge of the solar system, as he details what it's like to live "In the Days of the Comet"; and **Uncle River** lets us in on all the fuss and excitement stirred up by "My Stolen Sabre."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column considers the question of "Hobson-Jobson"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column examines the extreme Future Shock that lies ahead of us in "Singular"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our December Special Holiday Issue on sale on your newsstand on October 16, 2001, or subscribe today (you can subscribe, online, at *www.asimovs.com*), and miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you in 2002! Hey, and Christmas is coming up fast, in the Weird World of Magazines where we work six months ahead (this is the Holiday issue, remember?). A gift subscription to *Asimov's* makes a *great* Christmas present!

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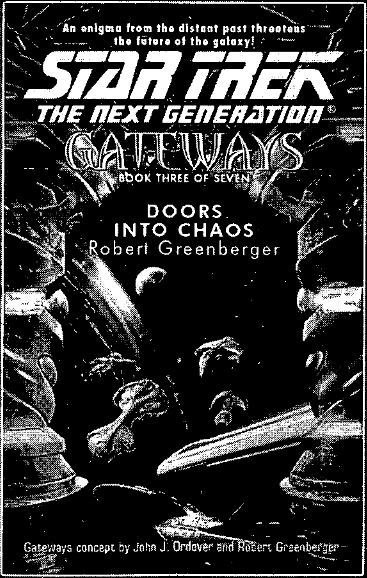

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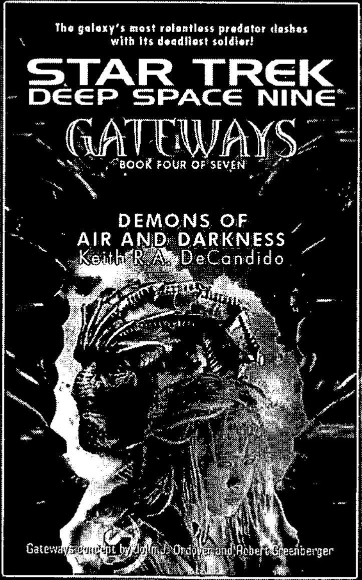

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DEEP SPACE NINE

GATEWAYS

BOOK FOUR OF SEVEN

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Gateways concept by John J. Ordover and Robert Greenberger

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put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

The magi, as you know, were wise men--wonderfully wise men--who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

That's it?

I've read longer grocery lists!

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